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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

MANDALA

BY

© VIRGINIA NEMETZ

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
AND RESEARCH IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

(FALL 1987)

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"I sketched every morning in a notebook a small circular drawing, a mandala, which seemed to correspond to my inner situation at the time....Only gradually did I discover what the mandala really is: 'Formation, Transformation, Eternal Mind's eternal recreation' (Faust, II). And that is the self, the wholeness of the personality, which if all goes well is harmonious, but which cannot tolerate self deceptions."

C. G. Jung, Mandala Symbolism

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Mandala submitted by Virginia M. Nemetz in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of M.A.

Sara Stambaugh
(Supervisor)

Morton Ross

Michael

Date: 5 Oct 1987

For Brad

ABSTRACT

In my novel, Mandala, Anna and Julia live parallel lives. Julia, who wishes to imitate Anna, obtains knowledge of the older woman in the only manner she knows, by spying on Anna.

The setting is an industrial town in Connecticut that is unprepared for disaster. That same industrial setting is also a departure from the stereotype of the New England landscape. It is a departure for which most readers are unprepared. When a flood nearly destroys the town, a narrative sequence of events changes the lives of the two women.

The title, Mandala, refers to the center of town, to the eye of the storm, and to a woman's awareness. As a circle, the mandala symbol depends on perfect balance and reflects the principle of contrasts within the story. Julia learns that, while she watches and studies another woman, it is impossible to live through another. Ultimately, she must gather her own experiences if she is to go on with her life.

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PART I

LOOKING OUTWARDS

Anna's Journal --

That spring, when I used to sit at the window watching the children walk home from school, was the season I met Julia. She was just a little thing then, in second grade, and always alone. It was raining that afternoon, when I first noticed her. She was sobbing and stumbling along in her big rubber boots, so I called down from the open window and invited her up for tea. It was the same year that a sparrow came to nest in the laurel bush near the path along the side of the house.

I used my best China that day and poured apple tea for us. We ate freshly baked muffins, and soon, she was smiling again. That day she made an innocent child's remark that went straight to my heart. "Since you live all by yourself with no children," she said, "I would like to be your little girl." We laughed and talked until I sent her home with a basket of muffins for her brothers and sisters. After that, I watched her from the window every day. She would look up and I would wave to her and smile.

Through the windows of my house, I see only details: the head of a geranium, a few leaves, the midsections of tree trunks, the thick branches of trees, and darkness or light; then, of course, there is whatever passes by or looks into the house. That summer I saw the sparrows hatch, and grow, and fly away. They never returned to nest there a second time, but I didn't mind because I had met young Julia.

Anna --

Flames licked at the inside of the Franklin stove. Rain gathered in disturbed rivulets as it flowed close to the side of the house. It descended in watery steps toward the ravine in a path that led to escape in the river. Water backed up in the eaves, gushing in sudden splashes, before spilling over the wall. After two weeks of rain, the house had surrendered to the constant echo of raindrops that reached through the open window on draughts of moist air.

Anna sat in the worn armchair beside the stove as fresh air, stirred by earth and water, drifted into the room. Though it had gotten dark early, the normal insect sounds of August were missing, the night birds gone. For days now, they had been silent. Anna knitted. She paused, then passed her hand across forehead and nostrils as though to wipe away an intrusive odor, knowing that if she looked up suddenly the dark window would come alive.

Anna continued to knit. Sometimes there were eyes that stared into the room, sometimes into the bedroom or kitchen window just over the flower box. Tonight, they entered the living room as an oppressive sigh that invaded her peace of mind. Eyes searched her every movement, staring, but empty, as they absorbed another view of her life. The eyes reflected the light of the softly lit lamp in watchful, glassy-eyed hunger. They were eyes that never closed, never slept. They were unhappy eyes that lived vicariously in the frames of windows as they took and took from her personal space and offered nothing in return. They were soulless, empty, ready to steal. What they sought, as they watched her sit quietly knitting-thinking-praying, she did not know. To copy, to study, to collect unguarded expressions--perhaps that was their intent. Of one thing she was certain, she was more disturbed when they suddenly disappeared.

It was the summer of 1955. The setting was a small, industrial city in Connecticut located in the Berkshire mountains. Before the month was over a flood would cause a great deal of destruction.

Anna had lived in town, alone, for ten years. She did not lock her doors at night, she did not draw the blinds. She had had enough of paranoia. When the war was over she had left Poland. She had left and did not expect that life would ever be the same. Her courage was manifest in a sense of humour that stubbornly refused to be beaten down or overcome. She considered what a voyeur might look like attached to a pair of eyes. The image she came up with was always masculine. The influence of the war, she decided. She had also talked herself into believing that the voyeur was harmless. Why he wished to waste his time at her windows, she could not imagine.

She believed that America was a peaceful place and she had made a decision to trust. She was forty-eight years old and unprotected. There were times when she did not sense the presence of the eyes immediately. If she was lost in her own thoughts, she became vulnerable. Although Anna was small and alarmingly thin, she was a strong woman. She used to say that the war had frightened the fat from her bones. This evening, however, she felt the eyes watching her and wanted to protect herself.

Sadness pervaded the room. It was the effect of constant rain and those eyes, dulled by depression. She had never considered reporting the eyes to the police. Being exposed would do them no good. That would merely be an opportunity for the town to taunt and hold captive what they did not understand. The war had taught her that lesson. She had decided long ago to allow the eyes to watch. Anna considered herself very much the ordinary citizen. In self-defence, she told herself that even a voyeur was God's child. It never occurred to her that the bodiless eyes might be unreal, astigmatic survival defences, or companions in loneliness. They were real. She could never turn on them. Tonight, however, she felt an impulse to reach out, to talk to them, and to name them. She wanted to jump up and say, "Come in out of the rain, come closer to the light, share with me these shadows on the walls. Please!" Anna stood up cautiously so as not to startle the eyes. "You have seen me naked. I have nothing to hide. Come inside."

Julia --

It is the spring of 1985. My name is Julia Day. It used to be Dayminski, but my father changed it when I was a kid. Lots of things have changed since then. I am forty-seven years old, a single parent, a family physician. I live in Chestnut Hill just outside of Boston, but I grew up right here in this Connecticut town. I guess what I'm doing on this visit is trying to put together pieces of a mosaic that is my life. I am also here to visit Anna's grave, to put flowers on it, and to forgive her. Something has been missing in my life for more years than I can remember. I have a vacuum in my personality. It resembles emptiness which is an anguish greater than loneliness.

The bus stops abruptly in front of the green. The door swings open to let out the remaining passengers. There are no helpful directions from the driver. There is no concern that someone travelling alone might be unfamiliar with the stop. I remember, as I stumble on the bottom step and stand in the bus depot, the ride into town and how life here used to be.

It is the East Coast, close enough to the ocean to make a pleasant day trip there, but not close enough to benefit from the cleansing tides of change. It is New England, a newer version of an older world, but it is a stagnant place. The city has declined in population and is surrounded by towns and boroughs, all proud of a heritage that has been nearly forgotten. A long steep hill descends from the city limits, through its cracked and shabby edges, before it arrives at the bus depot off the center green. The countryside is heavy with underbrush, newly green and overgrown. Tree branches and undergrowth crowd the highways and back roads, touching bus and car windows whenever there is a slow down to let another vehicle pass. A few passengers alight to stretch their legs at road stops and are bitten by swarms of mosquitoes. Others relieve themselves in crowded washrooms while reading graffiti on the backs of stall doors.

As I turn from the bus window, I nearly miss the welcome sign as the bus crests the hill and the driver tests his brakes. The speed limit is reduced and warning signs flash from timid yellow reflectors. The weak warning is ominous, and I clutch the top of the seat in front of me. Going forward, picking up speed, moving faster and faster, I have the feeling that we are out of control and careening wildly from side to side as the bus crashes into the heart of the city.

Despite my out-of-control imagination, the bus finally slows to a stop to let the first passengers off near Ted's Package Store. I adjust my seat to an upright position as a grim sadness steals over me. The town is insignificant but for the fact that it was once bustling with industry. It was founded long after the idealism of the Revolutionary War or the Civil War. It is populated with second generation Poles, Irish, and Italians. And I grew up here. The winter is gone and Orwellian prophesies of disaster left over from nineteen eighty-four have been forgotten. Anyone who was going anywhere has left. Those who stayed behind are mired in low ceiling saltbox houses. Their floors are decorated with linoleum and their walls are papered with layer after layer of floral patterned wallpaper until they are insulated from outside influences. There is little gratitude for the steady dribble of minimum-wage jobs or the existence of fully-paid mortgages. Soup kitchen lines have tripled. New England pride and the notion of thanksgiving have disappeared, to be replaced by bingo halls filled with the young, bread lines formed by homeowners, AM radio stations filled with self-pitying country and western tunes, and grandmothers petitioning for divorce.

Look at it, look at it, look at it: the bus moves into second gear and the rhythm changes. The wheels move quickly to the click of rusty hub caps. My reverie moves in a useless repetition of old tapes as the local package store blurs out of focus. We pass a television station which is housed in a small concrete block structure, surrounded by an empty parking lot. A white dish sits beside the front door like a large ear listening to the sounds from the town far below. The bus moves slowly in front of the empty lot. A 'FOR SALE' sign, faded and nearly obscured by scrubby weeds, is left over from a short-lived real estate boom. A rank smell invades the air-conditioned coach as the city dump comes into view. It is off to my right, across the aisle, and out the window beyond a grove of sycamore and hemlock trees, its smoldering piles of refuse ill-concealed.

Closer to the downtown area, the bus passes crowded, paint-cracked, and peeling inner city homes. The town is not self-sufficient any more. After the flood and the destruction of the Brass Mill, the Aluminum Mill, and the Anaconda Steel Mill, these factories pulled up stakes and left town. Now, there are strangers, newcomers who work in larger centers and commute. They live in elegant isolated condominium suburbs surrounded by security fences and they rarely come into town. The center green comes into view with its newer bandstand and newer benches for the same old men who gossip and keep an eye out for each other. They now sit back to back, facing the four corners of the square just as they did thirty years ago.

Anna's Journal --

If I am not grateful for what I am given, then I will receive no more. There have been moments in the past that stand out like a still life, caught in illusion, yet stark and real because those moments are framed by memory. Those images are indelible lights imprinted in my mind.

Once I took Julia camping at the top of the hill behind the house. She found Indian arrowheads, and we made a campfire in the middle of a great circle of laurel bushes. The blossoms had closed for the night, but their scent was still in the air. Lying there in our sleeping bags, looking up at the sky, we saw shooting stars appear like arrows of light or distant miracles. We talked about what it would be like to start high school and how it felt to be a woman. Julia asked me why I had never remarried. I had no illuminating answer. Things just had not turned out that way. Because she felt so close to me that night, Julia said, "Anna, I want to be like you when I grow up. And I'm sure I will never care if I am married, either."

I did not know what to say. I knew it was her way of telling me how much she admired me. So I let it go, thinking I would discuss it further another time.

Anna --

Tonight was the end of something. She had invited dark fears to come in out of the rain, to dance on her heart. And look what happened. Nothing. The world had not stopped. The clock on the wall kept its hands moving in a never ending circle. Only fear had stopped.

Anna doused the fire, put on a bright yellow slicker and boots, and left the house. Paolo's umbrella was still out on the porch, overturned by the wind and pushed into a corner. The rain had stopped when he left, but it was unusual for him to forget what he had brought with him. She lifted it from the porch and stepped into the darkness. Anna walked down Meadow Road which followed the river. At the North end she headed west, past rigid, scrupulously tended saltbox houses sitting on stark flowerless lawns and bordered by cleanly trimmed hedges. Brightly ribboned and flowered straw hats hung from hooks on front doors. The hats could be replaced by Indian corn in autumn, holly sprigs in winter, or wreaths at Christmas. There were few flower gardens in the austere yards. It was a detached and orderly attitude that these decorations exposed. Wealth was confined to the white mansions several blocks further up the road. Here, elegantly porticoed and columned, was classical architecture at its finest, with an affluence spread to spacious, manicured lawns and splendid perennial gardens. The people living in these houses were not expansive or careless in any way. Their religion was virtue and a certain attention to detail, manners, temperance, and prudence. No one relied on confessionals or priests to keep them in line. Conscience was reflected in the weeded borders of flowers, meticulously clipped lilac bushes, and the quiet couples who strolled arm in arm helping each other along, their dogs held strictly on leashes. Tonight, softly lighted windows glowed with antique beveled glass and through them Anna caught glimpses of polished oak floors and early American pressed glass. Sycamore and elm trees grew tall in the tended yards. They were guardians of privacy that made Anna feel like an intruder as she walked briskly through the neighborhood.

Many of the homes were owned by absentee landlords, the eminent and wealthy, who spent most of their time in New York or Europe. The houses were lived in by caretakers or aging relatives. Each home looked like a gracious old inn. Once, when she first came to America, she had thought to get a job as a housekeeper in one of these fine looking homes. But they had insisted on references and lots of experience. Anna had neither. The job as cleaning lady at the post office was impersonal. It required only an interview. As the rain began to fall once more and wind gusts pulled at the large unfurled umbrella, she walked purposefully down the middle of the road. There was no traffic, no big town nearby, little reason for anyone to travel this route at night. Close by, the Yale Summer School of Music was nestled in the woods. Walking along the deserted road, she could still hear the chorus and the soloists reaching up and up. One year they did Bruckner's 'Te Deum' with Mahler as conductor. Tonight, the voices were accompanied by wind and rain. Voices seemed to come out of the wooded roadside to blend with the blustery, unstarred night, the setting more fitting than the barn-like concert hall. Street lamps faded behind the last corner until the darkness was complete. Anna walked on, remembering voices raised in song. 'Te Deum, Te Deum', louder and higher the voices rose in an inspired and clear crescendo. At that moment, a gust of wind grabbed Paolo's umbrella and pulled it inside out. Anna gripped the cane handle as the music in her head reached a majestic finale.

She didn't realize she had walked so far or so quickly until she came to a dark crossroad. The sign posts were white, arrow-like, and stenciled like titles. She had a choice. She could go on to Milton or walk towards Caanan, Goshen, Northfield, or Litchfield. That way pointed to Norfolk and the music school, Music Mountain, and Lennox. Beyond Litchfield was the monastery. She was half way there. If she went home the eyes might still be there stalking the house, peering inside, taking whatever she was unable to withhold. Anna walked on, oblivious to the erratic ions that charged the air, adding to her restlessness. Like a sleepwalker, she chose the road leading to the monastery. It would be late when she arrived, but there was a guest house if she decided to stay.

Julia --

I stand and wait for the bus driver to find my luggage in the pile of suitcases and the boxes of parcel-freight on the sidewalk. So this is my hometown, I think. Loiterers stand and lean against the bus depot's smudged, outdated travel display windows and worn out door frame. They watch me, wrapped in the snug fit of their parochial world. I am wearing a light wool suit, rather than jeans or wrinkled cords with layers of leather belts and chains around my waist, and my luggage is an expensive, matched set.

There is some trouble with the last suitcase because it is not part of the matched set and the ticket has fallen off. The driver puffs up his chest, inflates his service-blue gabardine vest, and becomes officious. The loafers wait. I, too, stand and wonder if I have made the right decision in coming back for a visit--after all these years.

Anna used to tell me that if we are not grateful for what we are given, then no more will be received. I understand that now, but it is such an endless dreary circle of greed and desire: I don't have; I can't have; I didn't ever want; I want and need more, and more, and more. I want that circle to stop. Yes, I want it to stop. I have come back to visit Anna's grave and remember it all--the details that make up the mosaic of my life. There are pieces missing which might never be found. It has been twenty-eight years since I last saw her. But it was the events of the two years before that, in 1955, that stay in my mind with such tenacity. Especially the fearful days that began with the flood.

Those days are the empty spaces that stay in my memory like a mighty pivot, judgmental days that reached back to the past and out to the future, days that pointed in all directions and rerouted people's lives like a great water wheel. It was the center from which an entire town was spun and twisted like the center of a water mandala. It split orderly virtues like fallen trees and exposed a pulpy cross section of immigrants no longer related to the feelings that were once New England. Nothing could compete with the flood: no invasion of tourists gawking at autumn's thanksgiving array, no encroachment of wealth, no celebrity secluded behind a high fenced yard. The flood was the invasion. It was real.

The water crept higher and higher until it spilled into forgotten corners and stirred up the sediment of truth. I didn't understand it thirty years ago and I am not sure I understand it any better today. Anna talked about the moon being like the face of a cloistered nun, of stars, and chanting, and a romantic life that does not exist. When I look at the moon, I see a hole in an empty black drum. There are no exotic truths. How could she fill her head with such nonsense?

I witness suffering every day. I go to the hospital and prescribe the newest drugs, the best care available, and still there is death and pain, or worse, the loss of innocence, and the spread of cruel anger. Prayers don't help, they change nothing. She would tell me I am wrong, that I am only forty-seven and full of bitterness. But, if the flood could dispel error and illusion as Anna thought, why not dispel the anger, too? Did the flood do anything to sweep away the ugliness in town or fill the empty landscape?

Anna's Journal --

I am a woman who sees certain colors when I hear important sounds or words. Plato sent echoes into a cave and saw shadows on the walls. His voice vibrated with shadows, but he misunderstood their importance. I see shadows all the time. They satisfy my eyes.

During the long rains that preceded the flood, there were no shadows for days. One late afternoon, I saw a flock of wingless crows gliding silently through the trees. It didn't frighten me, but I turned on all the lamps in the house.

Soon after I had turned on the lights, Julia stopped by for a visit. She sat at the kitchen table doing some art work. She drew a colorful peacock, using the new paints I had bought for her. When she was finished, I was amazed at her composition. The peacock was insignificant compared to the size of his eye. We sat there admiring the drawing and the ruby eye staring magically into the darkening evening. "Why does the peacock have such a large eye?" I asked her.

"I don't know, Anna," she replied. "The eye got larger and larger and made me feel very calm," she answered.

I believed that the eye imparted a certain serenity because she was happier when she had finished the drawing than she had been when she arrived. But I wondered about the timing of her visit. Julia was such a curious child.

Anna --

The nuns were never surprised to see Anna. Each year she helped them garden. They grew enough vegetables and herbs to last the winter and enough flowers to adorn the altar. They raised their own cows, goats, and sheep, prepared dairy products, wove cloth for their own clothing, made sandals, baked bread, collected honey, and tended the orchard. They had a forge, where they repaired tools and made stained glass or metal sculptures, and they were busy with crafts that sold in the gift shop: dipped beeswax and bayberry candles, greeting cards, knitted shawls, and hand-carved rosary beads. If one of the nuns did an unusually good piece of sculpture, it was sold in the shop. But all work was done behind cloister walls, beyond the eyes of guests, or strangers, or relatives. Only Mother Jerome acted as a liaison to the needs of visitors or business in the outside community.

Anna walked along the dark road that led to the monastery. She needed to be out of the house. Tonight, she had seen them, again. Just that afternoon, she had suspected that Julia might have taken to watching her. Now, she was not so sure. Would Julia return so soon to stand outside, alone in the dark, to spy on her? The eyes had watched steadily while she embroidered a linen collar for the dress she had sewed for Julia's sixteenth birthday.

It couldn't be much farther to the monastery, she thought. Though it was too dark to recognize landmarks, and very quiet on the road, she sensed it was close by. Not a single car had passed, not a lighted house came in sight, just trees, dripping and weighted down with darkness. Unlike dry nights, it seemed that the atmosphere contained heavy and solemn overtones.

The first time Anna visited the monastery, she came upon it from the forest behind the garden. It was spring, and she was startled for a moment when she realized where she was. One of the nuns approached her to tell her that she was on private property, then turned back to her work of hoeing the garden. The impulse to stay and help had been overwhelming. Ignoring their covert glances, she picked up a hoe and began to dig alongside everyone else. Before long, she was forgotten as the nuns settled back to till the earth and lose themselves in the joy of the warm spring sun. Her presence was tolerated when she continued to visit throughout the summer. She planted and weeded and watched the garden grow. The nuns accepted her. They thought of her as eccentric, but sincere. They nodded when she arrived, or smiled when she burst into song. Once she had had the unaccountable urge to create a mosaic in the center of the herb garden. She carried the supplies she needed: mortar, tiny packages of delicate ceramic squares, tools, and plans. Then she made a circle of gentian purple, silver edged like the moon. It still wasn't complete, so she added an outer circle of orange like the fruit of the evergreen citrus tree or the robes of Tibetan renunciation. As the summer progressed, the planted herbs crowded closer and closer to the powerful circle until the mosaic came to belong to the garden. Before she was finished, she wanted to compose mosaics for the flower garden, the orchard, and the vegetable garden. Before she died, she wanted to create another circle mosaic at the entrance to the chapel. The symbol she would choose would not be a cross, with its burden of Christianity, but a rainbow, soaring and hovering between earth and heaven. It would seem to originate in a river and ascend to the clouds. The colors she intended to choose would vibrate with light. She said there was much to be learned by working a mosaic patiently. Her mosaic was a well-worked mandala. It gave her a sense of balance. To her creations she brought a woman's order and appreciation. She was grateful for being a woman, she told Julia, for being given the opportunity to work and grow and evolve her spirit. The nuns came to look at what she constructed, but only a few understood. She learned that the heart was restricted and limited even here, where reflection was part of a daily routine. The ones who understood saw each tile as an important contribution. It was because of their support that Anna enjoyed working in the heart of the garden, where it was easy to expand and grow.

The moisture in the evening air collected on her skin. Droplets gathered and dripped down her face. She brushed them away. So much water was too much after a long dry summer. Another hundred yards and a glow from the lighted guest house sign appeared around a bend in the road. When she saw its beacon, Anna decided she would stay till morning. It seemed that everyone had retired for the evening. She walked up the winding drive and stood outside the chapel for a few minutes. It would be empty until 2 A.M., when there would be a vigil. During matins, as the vigil was called, nuns kept the night filled with prayer.

Beyond the chapel was the locked gate to the back yard. Near the gate, Anna climbed a stone wall that was slippery with lichen. Before going to bed, she wanted to see the garden. She had read somewhere that rain drops were holy preachers; they watered the heart with grace. She was anxious to see how the herb garden had fared in the downpour. Inside the high wall was a lighted path from the nuns dormitory to the chapel. With awareness, the nuns walked in the middle of the night while the rest of the world lay asleep or in tears. Here was hour after hour of solitude and silence, meant to mark time, commitment, and devotion. Anna was attracted to their focused life. By the dim light of the path, she made her way to the mosaic. She walked slowly, her feet sinking into the muddy earth. The mosaic was there, surrounded by the perfume of mint, crushed beneath her boots.

Basil, marjoram, mint, and dill mingled fresh and pure. They were being drowned in the deluge. The mosaic was already under water, its shallow concave bowl overflowing. Not wanting to step on it with her dirty boots, she took the boots off and stepped on the orange ring of the moon. The water felt cold on her bare feet. It covered her toes as she curled them, then stretched them, and stood firmly. She was growing up and up. Like a young tree she stood taller and looked into the darkness. The eyes were gone. Anna was alone and aware of each raindrop. The darkness was still and reverent.

What she wanted to do was dance.

She slipped out of her jacket and then her skirt. With an electric awareness, she removed her pants and underclothes and stood naked. Her face lifted to the watery sky. Her rain-soaked feet tingled with a newly found sense of freedom.

Then she began to sway to a reedy flute sound that fluttered in her chest as she raised up her arms. Her heart expanded, her feet felt stronger, and she grew taller and taller. "This is no dream," she said. "I have never been so awake."

Anna danced and danced.

Julia --

I remember when the rain first became a problem. It was as if the floodgates of the sky had opened. I was delighted at the time. My summer job working in the tobacco fields was finished early that year. The crop was ruined by the constant rainfall. I remember how hard I worked, how dirty I got, and how embarrassed I was to get out of that bus in the middle of the North End parking lot at the end of the day, covered with a tiredness so deep it imprinted itself like a black tobacco stain. If Anna met the bus after work and we walked home together, there was no need to face curious stares alone or pretend I was happy when I wasn't.

It was the end of my second summer in the fields, but I never got used to waking up at dawn and walking for a mile in the chilly morning to the bus stop. Nor did I get used to the damp plastic bus seats or the groups of Puerto Rican girls with their pocket knives and plucked eyebrows, their hostility such a contrast to our pastoral surroundings. We spilled out of the bus into the endless rows of tobacco plants that steamed for miles and miles under shade nets. The effect of the nets was that of a pressure cooker: humid, airless, and condensed. I was strong then, brown and tough. Hour after hour, I moved along the rows, stringing young plants to an overhead wire, snapping the string with bare hands, digging my toes into the quiet of the soil, and bending up and down, over and over. But what I never got used to was knowing that my classmates were up at the lake or at some picnic. They were clean, and rested, and saving their energy for dates at night. I was ashamed to be working in the fields and never liked the feeling of stepping off the bus in the late afternoon, hiding my face, and hoping no one I knew would see me.

I wished Anna could be with me in the fields, so I could watch her and know what she would have done. When she came to meet me after work to buy me an ice cream cone or a cold cream soda at Jacob's Drug Store, she used to ask me what I was going to do with all my money--knowing I banked every cent. I would dream dreams, and build a future in the cloudless summer sky, and tell her how I couldn't wait to leave this place. I told her I would never forget her and promised that I would always write, but a shadow crossed her face.

"You could come and visit me when I leave," I said.

"What about your parents?" she asked. "Will you keep in touch with them?"

"Oh yes, of course," I answered. But I was going to be very busy, and they would have to understand that.

"You're a good child," Anna used to say. "I know you won't forget us."

Her sincere belief that I could do anything I set out to do, that I would be as wonderful as she believed me to be, used to lighten my steps. Tiredness would fall away, and I would come home humming a tune while I filled the old claw legged tub and soaked the tobacco stains from my skin. It was an experience, working in the fields, and in those days I was impatient to gather experience. It made my body strong, left my mind free. I counted the frames--thirty rows, thirty plants in each row. I relaxed my muscles so they could move in a streamlined motion. Loop the string around each plant stem, reach up, stretch, attach the string to the top wire, cut it: bend, reach, stretch, again, faster and faster. In that way, I was able to do piece work. Peace work, I call it today, hour after hour, day after day of toil, calming and peaceful. I heard a voice of solace that grew from the earth and reached upward in the tiny arms of plants. It was a voice that was to stay with me for years.

But that August, close to harvest, it started to rain and the rain went on and on. It rained for two weeks in the fields before they gave it up and let us go. The rows were muddy. Half-grown plants leaned heavily into the rows and slapped cold water against my legs first thing each morning. Water that collected in the stretched nets overhead pulled the nets downward until the water spilled through those giant mesh strainers. Each cold spill was a torture as it ran unexpectedly across my scalp and down my face, into my shirt, or against my warm stomach muscles. Whenever I reached up to string the plants to the overhead wires, I sank further into the ground. Between my toes and under my toenails, mud oozed. I was relieved when I heard of the layoff.

That last day in the fields everyone was on edge and worked silently. The foremen were more unpleasant than usual because we were useless out there against the downpour. They grouped the men into the same sections with the women, hoping to salvage some of the crop. The workers knew it was useless. The crop was not ripe enough.

The men were all Puerto Rican, older and harder, and they carried machetes at their sides. They were there to feed their families or make payments on their cars. Layoff was not something to which they looked forward. That afternoon, the tension in the rain-soaked air was thicker than the stems of ripe leaves. The men hacked savagely at the sticky green leaves while the women caught and collected them in orderly stacks. Each woman was assigned a male partner and dragged a basket behind her, filled it, and pulled it to the edge of the field where it was taken to the drying sheds. It had to be done quickly because the men worked swiftly, angry and disdainful of the young women. It was not like lunch hour when they leered and made suggestive finger gestures or smiled provocative smiles and pulled the women behind the packing sheds. This was hopeless work, the early end to a normally short season. This was unemployment and heaped up resentments filling the slow moving baskets. It was a long hopeless day with another hour to go before quitting time.

I was struggling back to my partner, slipping in the muddy track, trying to pass one of the other workers with an empty basket. It brushed along the backs of his legs.

"Stupido," he hissed.

I heard him in a tired daze. "Excuse me," I muttered.

There followed a long emotional string of Spanish phrases. Laughter bounced from one worker to the next, the threatening sounds of the men mixed with the sharp contempt of the women. Whatever was poured over my head was terribly funny to them. I struggled toward my partner and noticed, as I got closer, that he had stopped work to watch me. Juan never stopped work, so I wondered if something was wrong.

"You OK, Juan?"

He gave me a slow sexy smile and stood there soaking wet, his jeans clinging, his shirt painted to his chest and shoulders.

"Hey, those guys scare you?"

"No," I lied.

"Come on, let's you and me get down on one of these big soft plants."

"Drop dead, Juan!"

"Why not, baby? What's the use working in this muck?" Juan moved faster than I had seen him move all summer. He twisted the front of my shirt.

"Stay away from me or I'll scream." My knees shook and I was beginning to feel rivulets of prickly sweat join the water on my chest.

"Hey girl, you ever been fucked before," he asked softly. His machete hung loosely in his other hand as he moved closer until his jeans rubbed across my stomach, against my hips. Dark clouds and the gray tobacco nets formed a sky that descended to the field. My throat constricted until I could not breathe.

I screamed in terror, but the sound of my voice was lost in the muddy soil. Then I broke away from him and ran. I heard laughter following me down the leafy rows, echoing beneath the sagging watery nets. I ran faster, gasping and crying, to the bus that was pulled up along side the field. I banged on the door and stumbled into the bus.

"What's the matter kid?"

"Nothing," I sobbed.

Tom frowned. He was a young grade-school teacher who drove the bus as a part-time summer job. I stood on the bottom step, shaken and drenched.

"Well get in here and sit down. You look awful. How many times have I told you, you would never last with a bunch like this? God damn!" He sat there gripping the steering wheel and mumbling to himself.

"I don't want to talk about it, Tom. Besides, I'm all right."

"Sure. Sure you are. I'm just surprised something didn't happen a lot sooner. I'll turn the heater up so you can get warm."

I sat there quietly, watching the dreary landscape from the bus window. The workers were walking to the edge of the field and gathering in small groups. The fields were ruined.

"They're expecting that Hurricane Diana down off Cape Hatteras to be up here before long. That'll finish these fields for good...." The sound of Tom's voice and the bus heater lulled my senses.

"Don't you have any dry clothes?"

"Dry? What's that? Don't worry, I can put up with anything if this is my last day here."

The women began climbing into the bus silently. I thought it was the layoff making them so sullen. Everyone was a worse mess than usual, hair done up in curlers rolled under wet head scarves. They had dates every night after working like slaves for minimum wages all day. Now they sat, as usual, as far back in the bus as they could, while the sounds of their giggling and loud talk drifted to the front of the bus.

To me they were a tough scary bunch. I was more afraid of the women than the men. One dirty look and they would be down on each other with abusive language and pocket knives. I stayed away as quietly as possible. The girls who weren't Puerto Rican were the worst. Their hair was bleached harsh and brassy with the roots growing out. They wore rollers in their hair, and heavy makeup to work, and when they were invited to go behind the sheds with the men they always went. Most of them smoked cigarettes for lunch because they were dieting. And they were older than me--seventeen or eighteen. I looked down at one of my long brown braids that had come lose. It would take hours to get the tobacco juice out of it tonight. But the thought that I could soak for a week if I wanted to was a relief; I was never coming back to this place.

One of the girls bumped my shoulder on her way up the aisle. I moved closer to the window and pretended I hadn't noticed. The bus pulled out of the lot.

I stared at the rows of men that lined the edge of the field waiting for the men's bus. Water running down the window pain made their images wavy, but I saw Juan tip his machete in a salute as the men broke into raucous laughter. Tom started the bus and we passed the large drying sheds for tobacco leaves. Bats could be seen as they flew through the empty structures. When the women sitting in the bus began to talk animatedly, I felt nervous. We drove by the main office entrance where the foreman stood in the doorway, hands on hips.

A few miles down the highway the women behind me were still talking loudly when I felt something--a crushed paper lunch bag--hit me on the head and roll softly to the seat beside me. Now what?

A roll of wax paper came next. It couldn't be ignored.

"OK. Who threw this garbage at me?" I stood up, trying to look as tough as they looked when they fought.

There was no answer, only smirks. Then, from the last seat on the bus, an overweight bleached blond broke into howls of laughter. Her name was Linda. I still remember it because the men used to say her name as a joke. We all knew that 'Linda' meant beautiful in Spanish.

"It was me. Want to make something of it?" There were a few more snickers, then silence.

I stood there, afraid to answer, afraid not to.

"Thinks she's too good for us. Too bad Juan didn't fuck your little ass." That started a spate of Spanish, angry, and filled with hatred.

"OK, simmer down back there!" Tom slowed the bus. "If I hear any more talk like that you'll all get off and walk!"

The noise continued in Spanish with no one voice louder than another--until someone spit and the spittle found its target. Tom rubbed the back of his neck, pulled out a handkerchief, then slowed the bus to the side of the highway.

There were shouts and objects thrown from the back of the bus. Curses were directed at Tom. I was forgotten as the hate and frustration were redirected. Tom stood up and walked menacingly to the center of the aisle. He pulled the first girl he came to out of her seat and dragged her to the doorway, struggling and kicking.

"All right...ladies...OFF, or I'll remove you one at a time. That is, unless you'd rather have me phone the police...." The anger-filled silence was followed by a shuffling of feet and rustling of bags as they got out of the bus in the pouring rain. I looked up at Tom.

"Stay where you are! You want to get killed?"

When I stepped off the bus at the North End, the only passenger that afternoon, there were few people on the streets. The rain felt cleansing. It hadn't been so bad, I deduced. There had been the cool earth in the morning, the healthy sweat of work, the mechanical movements of my body as I tended row after row of plants under the shade nets. It wasn't so bad, the work, especially, when Anna met me after work, so I could tell her about my dreams and what I would do with my hard-earned money.

Anna's Journal --

There are people who affect me profoundly. It seems important to understand what is happening when I am with them. They affect my decisions and the direction of my life. Sometimes, they get in the way. Other times, they quicken my steps, but their influence can never be ignored because they, too, are experience. For that reason, I used to wonder about the person who looked in my windows all the time. Was it Julia or Paolo? Perhaps it was Nathan or my next-door neighbor's husband.

At first, I was very uncomfortable, wondering if it was someone I knew, or if they had seen something private. But after a while, it did not matter. There was nothing to hide and a lot to learn. In the end, it does not matter what form my struggles must take. Whatever the voyeur needed to learn from me, I decided, I also needed to learn from the voyeur. Acceptance, surrender? I sensed a feeling of hurt whenever the eyes caught me unaware. In my heart, I knew I had to search for the source of my loneliness.

Anna --

Panting and fear of discovery, then a noise as the shadows were penetrated. The eyes under the eaves vanished. Loud footsteps sounded on the stone path. They fell heavily in firm, composed, dull sounds. Paolo's face came into view. He plodded up the path and peered through the window.

"Anna. How about inviting an old man in for a drink." He was out of breath.

She hurried to the back door, stepped outside, and gazed beyond him at the dark rainy night. Paolo climbed to the back porch and propped his open umbrella in the corner.

"So, do I get to come in?"

"Yes. Yes, come." He enfolded her in a large warm hug as she glanced once again over his shoulder. "Did you see anyone on the road, tonight?"

"Except for the rain, there is nothing out there. Thought you might want some company."

"I do. I was just thinking the same thing."

Anna led Paolo into the kitchen and put the kettle on the stove. Looking at him sitting in her small crowded kitchen, his large gnarled hands at rest on the table, she felt her love for him like a full-blossomed flower. He seemed sad and lonely this evening, and his need for love grew inside her as though it was her own.

"You've been living alone too long, old friend."

He laughed and she forgot about the aura of sadness he had carried into the room. He was so intense, even desperate at times, but she forgot all that when he laughed. The next few hours passed contentedly. Anna knitted, Paolo smoked his pipe. She tried listening to the shortwave radio, but static crackled from newsrooms and concert halls. The rainstorm locked out the world, leaving this one bright space sheltered from a starless night.

Paolo was robust for his years. He overwhelmed the small room as he talked. Lately, his mind was centered on his homeland, and he reminisced more and more often about the mountains and his village near the Italian border. Tonight, he remembered the mists that covered those mountain tops, their vapors that turned to clouds that gathered to create lightening and inspiration. In this sea-level town, he complained, inspiration evaporated.

"You know, Anna, I could hike to the tops of the mountains at home. Each time, I felt I might discover a new galaxy. I was so much closer to heaven there."

"And here there is just the river burrowing into the ground, heh, old man?"

"You laugh. Up there the angels sang. When I shouted my name, vibrations went up uninterrupted. The air was clear. Certain things were magnified up there, others destroyed. Yes, my name went straight to heaven."

Paolo had been in this country for many years, but he was not happy to have left Switzerland. Anna nodded and listened, but rarely thought of Poland any more. That life was another lifetime. The only life that mattered was this one. This room, with its open window shining into the rain, was protected like an ark. Outside, a curtain of rain hung from the window and veiled the room. There was only this small New England town, not Poland, not Switzerland, nor how she had come here ten years ago. It only mattered that she was here. Not once had she found it strange to be across an ocean in another culture, surrounded by another language, another landscape. It was with a feeling of rightness that she had stayed in Connecticut. Paolo did not feel the same. He had left nothing of his old life behind. Anna wondered about his self-imposed exile and why he endured. He did not, would not, talk about his past. There was something about family, disapproval, and his desire to be an artist. She only knew that he pleased her. She loved him. His voice and eyes reflected a fire. He was angered, yet energized by his memories, saddened, yet softened by his emotions. It made him animated and younger than his seventy years--when he relived the past.

"You know what my father wanted me to be, Anna?" He stood in the small kitchen, anger and sorrow making him forget where he was. But he had told her before.

"Yes. I know."

"A hotel owner! My God, Anna. I would have died."

"But in the end, that isn't what you chose, Paolo."

"I know, I know. But why do they make it so hard to say no? Why would such a thing break my father's heart, enrage him?"

"Control. People like to control. Without it there is fear...of the unknown."

"So much fear that this monstrosity of a hotel was in the family for five generations? That much fear?"

"That makes it even greater."

"He said I could break up rocks in the back yard...after working for twelve hours a day, seven days a week!"

"Can you never accept what you did if your father could not accept it?"

"But, Anna, they had to sell the hotel. There were no more sons." Paolo slumped back into his chair and Anna put her hands over his. He was overwhelmed with guilt.

"Forgive him, Paolo, then you will forgive yourself."

This was too much. Anna knew if she continued he would turn his anger to her next. She also knew that his father was dead and forgiveness would have to come from the heart, not the mouth. She wished he could open his heart. Then, perhaps, he could let her in. There was a time when she mentioned that it would be good to live together, but he shook his head as though the idea was unworthy. Later, he said that living with an artist would drive her crazy. He lived for his art. "Why?" she asked. "Because I clean the post office? Because I don't take art so seriously or think it is the highest goal in life? There is more to life than art, Paolo!" She didn't mean to sound shallow, but she believed it would not be difficult to live with this man. There were moments, like now, when she believed that living with him would be easier than waiting for him to visit.

When Paolo left, Anna paced the living room, going occasionally to the open window, expecting the eyes to reappear. They were clever, but she knew they were out there watching. Paolo's visits exhausted her energy because each time he left her vulnerable, no longer self-contained and protected. While he was in the house, loneliness was invisible, but when he left, nothing was the same. Stains, tears, and ragged edges appeared on the furniture and walls. The fire needed more wood. Tonight, an opal fog descended among the trees. The garden was still. The wind gusts and rain had quieted. Darkness entered the window, bringing a chill. She decided it was no use to build up the fire or wait for the eyes to visit. It was time to go out, to walk off the feeling that nothing was as it should be.

Julia --

Tanglewood when I was sixteen: cool lawns, bright blankets covering the ground, a mosaic of life and color, a lazy afternoon. People spoke reverently or listened in silence to the magnificent voice of a young singer named Joan Sutherland. A child's voice called out and drifted away. Picnics were packed and finished. Voices were hushed. The strain I had been under all week began to take its toll and I soon fell asleep.

Nearly a week before, Nathan had phoned to ask if I would like to hear a concert at Tanglewood. "Julia," he said, "Come with me. We'll watch jets shooting across the sky. It'll be like a bad painting. You'll go home with something to put in your diary."

"Sure," I answered, "I like music and I've never been there." I didn't respond to his cynicism. I did want to put it in my diary--to be remembered as special. It was the sensual undertone of his voice I heard. It never said what the words did. I thought about our date all week. What should I wear, what could I talk about, how should I smile? My mind was a prison of adolescent torture.

Sunday morning, I got up early, washed and set my hair, did my nails, and skipped church. To be alone, I crept out to the chair on the front veranda. I huddled in a corner of the worn out seat with my knees to my chin. Once or twice I heard someone calling me when they returned from Mass. I didn't answer. I skipped lunch just to have more time to daydream. I had dated before, but this was different. I was in love with Nathan. This was my first date with someone who mattered to me, instead of with boys who were friends or like brothers, people I had known all my life. I wanted to understand these new feelings.

On Sunday afternoon, Nathan picked me up in a borrowed MG convertible. The top was torn, and I helped him to lower it. It was going to be a perfect day. He had a picnic planned for the afternoon, and I had never been to an outdoor concert. Nathan was polite and charming and said the right things about getting me home early when he met my mother.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Day, I'll get Julia home by dark."

"That will be fine, Nathan." She leaned on the door and looked at the car skeptically.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Day. It runs."

"Is that an old-fashioned picnic basket in the back seat, Nathan?"

"Sure is! My mom got it out of the attic and packed it herself. She thinks Julia is going to love this concert. And she says she'd like to meet you one day soon, Mrs. Day."

That was the perfect touch. My mother was so busy having babies and taking care of the kids she rarely had the chance to get out. But I knew she would have loved meeting Nathan's mother. His father was one of the foreman in the same factory where my father worked. Nathan always knew just what to say when he wanted to be likeable. He was handsome, too, tall, with black hair, and velvet blue eyes. The fact that he was still skinny and awkward that summer gave him the appearance of innocence. He had a stubborn chin and an arrogant tilt to his head that I mistook for self confidence, and a charm with grownups that I mistook for maturity. He was only two years older than me, but he was a great dreamer and that made him romantic. He wanted to be an artist, a painter. I saw nothing impractical, spoiled, or self-centered about him. I liked his eyes and his voice, particularly his voice. In his tone of voice, if I listened carefully, I could hear an inner yearning for greatness. In his voice I heard desire, and in my heart I wished that desire was meant for me because when I was with him I felt soft inside and grown up.

"You two enjoy the concert."

We waved and called good-bye to my mother as we backed down the drive and drove away. My mother had fallen for the charm. What did she know about classical music or open-air concerts? She was used to the country and western songs she played when she was house cleaning. When she was happy, which was seldom any more, she sang along with a twangy high voice that was out of character. My mother was a tall big-boned woman who could have been an opera singer or an Amazon. Because of her many children, her heavy body was incongruous with the childlike voice that knew the words to heartbreak songs and sang them in a powerless soprano. But it had been good to know that Nathan could get her to smile.

I had never ridden in a convertible and soon found that all the work of curling my hair and combing it so carefully was undone. I ended up grabbing at it and containing it in a long braid. I had a sweater with me and was glad to wrap it around my shoulders, but avoided putting it on because it was a snug fit and I was still self-conscious about having a woman's breasts.

We drove through towns I had never seen, small towns with country inns: Blackberry Inn, Riverton Inn, and Mountain View Inn. I never ate in restaurants, because we didn't have that kind of money, but Nathan said he would take me to one of the inns some evening.

It sounded nice. We drove north, farther into the Berkshires. Conversation was impossible in the car, but it was exciting to ride with the wind on my face while sitting next to Nathan. There was a lot of tension between us, but I felt exhilarated when we were together, free, and reckless, and filled with energy. I found it odd that a visually-oriented person like Nathan could take an interest in me. Color and shape meant nothing to me. When we were together I could not help but stare at Nathan, fascinated by his face. But when we were apart, I could barely remember what he looked like. I suspect he was only handsome to me. What I heard was his voice. I was finely tuned to it. And I could feel his eyes when they concentrated on me. I remember how he made me feel when he touched me, but I never saw him as he was. He made me feel awkward and shy when he tried to act hard and cynical. I wanted to touch him, to close the distance between us. But most of all, I never tired of listening to his voice.

"This has to be the most parochial place in the world," he commented, looking at me strangely. "Sometimes, I wonder how long it will take you to catch up, Julia."

I didn't understand what he was trying to say, nor was the moving car conducive to a serious answer. I tried not to take offense. It was just one more of those tense awkward moments between us. But I knew that Nathan hadn't always lived in town, that he had been in other countries, and I did wonder what he meant.

Once, just once, I had been as far as New York City. The year before, our high school drama club had rented a bus and we went to an off-broadway theatre to an exotic-sounding place called 'The Circle in the Square'. There we saw "The Trojan Women". During the performance, I became overwhelmed with the tragedy of the story. Suddenly, I burst into laughter in the suspenseful silence and heard the shock of my inappropriate laughter ripple through the audience. Then someone hissed at me, while I sat there, centerless and numb, and listened to the sound of Hecuba's voice.

Tanglewood, when we arrived there, resembled a medieval clearing in the forest complete with vendors, jesters, and merchants. The audience was relaxed. They carried elaborate, wicker picnic baskets, white wine, cloth napkins, and barefoot children in expensive togs. We found a spot for our blanket. I wanted to be closer, to hear every note and sound, but Nathan was expounding on the virtues of Wagner and I didn't want to interrupt or appear unsophisticated. I became suspicious when we were finally seated. Our fringe position did not seem to be shared by music lovers. I noticed most couples around us holding hands or kissing. When we had our picnic, Nathan offered me a cold beer, but I refused. We were in Massachusetts where the drinking age was eighteen, but I was just sixteen. I tried to act sophisticated, but I don't suppose I fooled Nathan. There was a hushed quiet around us as the concert began.

Lovers got down to the business of arranging blankets and getting more comfortable. It was a strain to hear the music, a music filled with emotions I could barely identify. As the music became increasingly more complex, a sweet smell drifted by on the slightest breeze. My first thought was that smokers found the most peculiar moments to decide to smoke. I turned in time to see Nathan inhaling a cigarette that he had obviously rolled by himself. I tried not to laugh until his eyes met mine.

X

"Do you want a smoke?"

"I don't like to smoke. It hurts my throat."

"This isn't just a cigarette, Julia," he whispered, "I've put something else in it."

I stared at him, blankly.

"You know. Want to try some?"

I did not know. I was not sure what he was talking about. I did know it was something wrong. "But Nathan, aren't you afraid you'll get caught?"

"Don't be such a scared ninny."

I was shocked into silence. For just a fraction of a second I saw myself the way Nathan must have seen me--naive. At the same time, I was uncomfortable and hurt. The air around us got heavier with smoke. I shook my head.

"Do what you want and leave me alone!"

I settled myself on the blanket and closed my eyes. The music, once I had fallen asleep, became a visible kaleidoscope as wave after wave of color and sound disturbed my balance, and Sutherland's voice pierced my troubled mind. In my sleep was the lucid sensation that I would not awaken for many years. I saw a cellist drawing a bow across the strings of his cello and I shivered in agony each time the bow was pulled-pushed-forced across the strings. It was all mixed up with sounds of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and a Wagnerian rage. I wanted to scream at the warring sounds or smash the cello to stop its dissonance. I was still asleep when the first drops of rain fell on my upturned face.

I woke to the prickling sensation of cold water combined with the chill of the music and Nathan's voice. People all around us were packing up their picnic hampers and folding blankets. Some were already running to the parking lots, while those who had paid to sit under the canopy listened in comfort. Devotees began to set up their own umbrellas and draw closer to hear Wagner in the rain. Nathan watched me, oblivious to the downpour. When I jumped up and started packing our picnic, he finally grabbed the blanket from the grass and awkwardly pulled it over the two of us like a tent. With his arm around my waist, we stumbled to the car and put up the leaky top. My anger at his insensitivity dissolved instantly at his touch. The rain, which might have spoiled such a day, had changed our mood and we laughed like children.

I was ignorant of the fact that Nathan had taken drugs. My anger had vanished, and in its place I was more convinced than ever that I was in love. I wanted to trust that love. I stared down at my reflection in a puddle beside the car. The cold raindrops on my face may have been seeds of awareness, or that day might have taken place in my imagination. My response to Nathan's voice, the music, and my own reactions still become confused with dreams.

A few years ago when I visited Nathan in his Soho studio, I asked him about that day. All he remembered was rolling his own cigarettes and watching me fall asleep.

"You looked so innocent with your eyes closed," he said. "You used to frighten me with those intense brown eyes, the way you used to stare at me. I loved you very much, Julia. But I was afraid you would want me to take care of you. I was young, and I wanted very badly to be an artist."

Strange, that he should remember my eyes, when all I remembered was the sound of his voice, and of course, the way he made me feel.

Anna's Journal --

I have discovered that prayer resonates and clears the heart. That is what happens when I pray in the garden.

I love to work in the garden. It is only a square of earth, yet when I am there, sweating or digging my fingers into the soil, I grow. The garden pulls at my body until I no longer feel that I may float away. It keeps me grounded, and sometimes, the same thing happens if I hold Julia's hand.

When Julia was eleven, she had a bad experience. She wanted to dance, but her parents disapproved. She went, without their permission, to dance classes and paid for those classes with money earned from baby-sitting. After a year had gone by, the dance teacher phoned her home to tell her parents of the recital. Naturally, Julia's mother was surprised by the call. Her reaction was unpleasant. "No," she told the instructor in a hostile voice, "Julia will not be in the recital, nor will she return to your school next year." Julia stopped by for a visit the next day. I could tell she had been crying.

We went out to the sunny garden together and I took her hand. After a while, I pulled her to her feet and we began to dance in the garden. I felt sad that she could not continue her dance lessons, so I danced and prayed instead, that her heart would always dance.

Anna --

If it had not been the eyes, or the rainy night before the flood, perhaps something else would have driven Anna to walk all the way to the monastery. She might never have found herself exposed and as naked as the day she was born. As it was, when the nuns did find Anna in the garden, she was dancing. She may have been dancing five minutes or an hour. She could not tell them. Mother Benedict was awakened by one of the younger nuns and now she was fully dressed. She reached out to embrace Anna and pull her under the wings of her voluminous habit.

"It's all right, Anna. I just want you to come with me." She reached out her arms and drew the fevered trembling body into warm dry robes. Anna shivered and looked down at the white skin of her exposed body.

"It's a beautiful night, Mother. I was praying...." she murmured, hearing her own voice, disembodied and distant.

"Yes, Anna, I know. But it's time to come in now. The flesh is only temporal, my dear. You can't treat it to such doses of excitement without getting sick." She smiled kindly, and Anna thought that somewhere in her ageless heart she did understand.

"Do you understand, Mother?"

"Do you think not? I may never have danced naked in a garden, but I understand. Sometimes that kind of joy is hard to contain."

"Thank you, Mother."

"Anna, I haven't seen such joy in many years. But come, it is time to get you dressed and in bed."

Back in the dormitory of the cloister, several nuns in their night dresses, came forward with dry clothing. Mother Jerome was given instructions to take Anna to the guest house, so she waited with her cloak, two umbrellas, and the keys. The house would have to be opened, a fire built, and blankets taken out of closets. She led the way with her flashlight. To Anna, it seemed so different than it had just an hour ago. The large puddles were obstacles, the rain torrential, and Mother Jerome was annoyed.

"My goodness, Anna. You might have picked a better night to go dancing! And at your age...!"

"I'm sorry to cause you trouble, Mother."

"Oh, Anna, you're no trouble." The nun sighed. "It's just that sometimes you have the energy and exuberance of a child. Sometimes, I wonder if you are a saint or a crazy woman."

Anna signed. "You don't understand, Mother?"

"No, I don't. But not all of us are blessed with such a yearning to know God. Most of us have to be content with the mundane."

"Is that what this is...a yearning for God? You know I'm not Catholic, Mother."

"I know, Anna, and so does Mother Benedict. But she wouldn't be the head of this monastery without great compassion and understanding."

"I'm confused, Mother. Why here? I'm not a religious person. Since the war, I haven't believed in a church, only in my own hard work."

"Maybe you don't want to acknowledge a gift you've been given. I don't have any answers for you, Anna. It is not my place to comment."

The guest house was unlocked. Anna helped Mother Jerome light a fire in the stone hearth and make up a bed.

"Will you be all right? Do you want to be called for matins in an hour or will you sleep till morning?"

"Yes, call me."

"Rest then."

An hour later, a small bell connected to the chapel was rung in the guest house. Anna was wide awake, but resting on the cot before the dying fire. Taking up the umbrella and her damp boots, she walked to the chapel to sit in the shadows of the votive light as it burned near the altar. She struggled to stay awake.

The nuns could be heard moving to their seats behind a lattice work grate that separated the back of the altar from the cloistered section of the chapel. The lower half of the partition was curtained in white, while suspended at the top of the screen was an angel's head with wings. They filed in quietly to their accustomed places, then began with one voice to sing the matins in Latin. This was believed to be the purest time of day, a time when the earth was quiet, when restless vibrations were minimal, when prayers of devotion would reach into the farthest corners of the universe. Matins was sung to herald the beginning of another day, to give thanks to the night that relieves the day. As they sang the sacred rituals of prayer, their worship was intense and powerful, as though plucked from the midst of dreams and darkness.

The chapel was small, with cane-backed chairs instead of pews and a carpeted floor on which to kneel. The walls and ceilings were covered in cedar and gave off the smell of a secret closet. Small painted statues carved of wood sat in niches around the room. The altar was a pine table set with candles on a white embroidered cloth. Wild flower bouquets of lupin, golden spider daisies, black-eyed Susans, and Queen Ann's lace adorned the table. An arrangement of river stones inside the altar area formed a grotto to which had been added pink roses and calla lilies from the garden. Gregorian chants echoed against cedar beams and drifted through the wood barrier, the voices clear and sharp-edged sang 'et spiritus in sanctus'.

Many of the nuns were very old, some of them widows, taciturn and stern, but their voices, when raised in prayer, were youthful and sincere. Talking was not encouraged inside the cloister: only silence, solitude, prayer, and work. Their songs reached into the chapel where Anna sat, then drifted out through open windows. Strains of their songs would never be lost. They were selfless contributions to the universe. Yes, she thought, there is a need in the world for what takes place here. She could imagine their sweet voices mixing with devotional voices all over the globe, their prayers reaching like fingers that would eventually join.

Something had happened to change Anna that night, but she didn't want to dissect it. She was content to kneel and absorb the sounds, to store them under her skin and in her heart and mind. Tomorrow was another day. She walked back to St. Gregory's and climbed into bed. Enough had happened for one day--enough for a lifetime.

Julia --

"Hey lady, this is the end of the line." The bus driver turns around in his seat, concern in his voice.

I have taken a local bus from the center green to get to a car rental agency that I am told is now located quite a distance up Meadow Road.

"Lady, you gonna stay n' come back to town with me?" He sounds annoyed when he sees I am daydreaming. "Tourists!" he grumbles.

"Pardon me?"

Instead of an answer, I receive a taciturn shoulder. I can see him squinting at me in his rear-view mirror.

"I'm not a tourist." I feel compelled to return his hostility.

"Look like a tourist to me, ma'am. No offense, of course."

"Well, I'm not. Used to live right here on Meadow Road...before the flood."

"That so." He didn't believe me, I could tell.

"Well there have been so many comin' around, we're turnin' into a reg'lar fishbowl. They say that's what happens to a place when it can't make it on its own...yup."

"Well, I'm Stephen Day's daughter."

"That so...'Fraid I wouldn't recognize you any more. Used to have pigtails didn't ya?"

"Braids."

"Yup. That's so....How's your dad doin? Still usin' the name Day, instead of the name he was born with?"

"He's dead."

His pause, at this moment in our conversation, is no longer than his other considerations.

"That so. Sorry to hear it."

I couldn't think of a response to that, so I waited.

"Maybe it's best that way. He wouldn't have liked seein' all these damn tourists starin' over a fella's back hedge. That writer Frost had the right idea, a real Yankee he was. High fences, he said. Yup...." He opens the bus doors slowly.

"You gettin' out here?"

"Thank you Mr..."

"Baldwin." I remember him, now, but I am shocked to realize he is so old.

I clutch my overnight case, shoulder my purse, and step down from the bus feeling like Rip van Winkle. I want to rent a car so I can go back, pick up my luggage at the bus depot, and look around. One of the first places I want to visit is the dam site farther up Meadow Road. The reservoir was built just after the flood, but I had never seen it filled with water.

I would rather not go back down Meadow Road in the wake of the bus. There is not much I recognize any more. However, impulsively, I drive back that way past my old house. It is covered in blue-gray, modern aluminum siding and surrounded by tidy flower gardens. The old barns out back are gone. The mulberry tree that once made such a juicy mess alongside the house is cut down, and both of the gnarled apple trees up in back where our swings used to hang are pruned and tidied. The house has changed hands frequently in the last thirty years. My brother Chris has always kept me informed about local gossip. The first time, the place was sold just after I left for college. Dad never consulted me. In those days, he and his new wife must have needed the cash. I don't blame him. The house was a lot of trouble. There was always something wrong with it and he never was the best handyman.

Anna used to tell me not to blame him, that he was doing the best he could. But my father used to drink a lot, more than she ever knew. He was good at hiding it from people, and we were all good at hiding it from ourselves. I always wondered if Anna knew how much I suffered under his criticism, while never letting on, because I was too proud. I would never have told anyone what it was like, not if it was killing me. If I told, I reasoned, then what would I be left with? the same home life, the same drunken father, the same furtive keeping away from him. Except, added to it, people might feel pity for me. I wanted Anna's love, not pity. I thought, if she didn't know what went on in my home, she would love the real me, not the me who was attached to all those quarreling brothers and sisters and parents who hated each other--just me. I was young enough to think I could disassociate myself from all the pain. I did not know that I was my past and my experiences, that I would never escape who I was and what had formed me. I ran a long time before I stopped to look at my parents' lives and my own childhood and acknowledge them as mine.

"Someday," Anna said. "I hope you will be grateful for the life you were given, for the gifts and the graces in your life."

I sometimes thought you were a holy woman, Anna. But I was too embarrassed to discuss my thoughts on holiness with anyone. I was afraid I might get that glazed-over look my mother used to get on her face when she mentioned God's name. A reverent attitude sounded false on her lips. My mother was not prepared to talk about a spiritual life. The way my mother said "God", the way her face reddened, and the way her voice caught made me want to turn away. I believe she was out of touch with her finer sensitivities, and getting in touch with her emotions for a moment made her feel angry and confused. I just didn't want someone to see that look on my face. In some ways it gave her an approachable vulnerability, but it was gone as quickly as it appeared. I was left with the sensation that she couldn't have spoken the Lord's name, because my mother was not a believer. She was as irreverent as they came, so disillusioned by life and her lot in it that I stayed as far away from her as possible. I suspected that whatever emotional attitude she had might be contagious.

By the time the flood hit town, and it seemed like the whole place was going to go under, I had taken to being pretty silent around the house. It was a peculiar silence, my own eye of the storm: watchful, waiting, ready to explode with my own rage. I daydreamed of escape. In my dreams, I was an escape artist. My nerve endings were wired like a tightrope walker's, taut and nearly broken. Each day I held back and tried to stay balanced. I developed secret safety valves, like twists, in my personality. These distortions in perspective helped me to cope. I think whatever happened then was responsible for getting me off track all these years. But I couldn't seem to help myself. The flood waters rushed over the town and swept away all evidence of what once was. It was so sudden and irrevocable, so destructive and unforgiving. During that shock, I did what I had to do and tried not to draw attention to myself.

I wasn't surprised to get up one morning and find that Dad had already left the house. He was a member of the volunteer fire department, and we had all heard on the radio the night before that they would be out at dawn with other volunteer rescue teams.

The kids were all in the house, driving everyone crazy with their boredom, so I got up early that morning to make breakfast for them and tidy the house before Mom woke up. She had looked miserable all that summer, swollen out of recognition with another baby inside her. Because of all the complaining she did about those of us who existed, I couldn't believe she was pregnant, again. In my adolescent idealism, I thought women either had babies or they didn't, but moaning about it after the fact was a waste of time.

"You'll see," she used to tell me. "You'll get as many as God gives you." She used the word God with that tight look she got on her lips. And it was true that there were already eight of us.

One morning it was eleven o'clock before she got up. I watched her walk slowly into the kitchen, her bulging middle sagging tiredly. Everything about my mother was tired and unhappy: the deep circles beneath her eyes, the puffy face and hands. It was the sad way she sighed and left sentences dangling and unfinished that often made me feel sorry for her, that is, until I listened to her fighting with Dad, or nagging and screaming all the time. Then I didn't feel sorry for anyone but myself and the years I would have to put in before I could escape.

The kids had finally stopped fighting and were in the living room playing Monopoly. I knew by the look on mom's face that she wasn't getting out of her bathrobe that day.

"Get me a coffee will ya, Julia?" She sank heavily into a chair at the kitchen table.

The radio was the only noise in the kitchen as I prepared the coffee, dark the way she liked it. I was about to pour the coffee. Mom was sitting there looking like she might not make it through the day.

The radio blared, but she appeared not to hear the news, as though she was tuned in to her own station of misery. It was too much to bear, watching this heavy woman trying to lift herself far enough out of depression to drink a cup of coffee. Who was my mother? I remembered, vaguely, a different mother who pulled me on a sled in winter and held me on her lap when I was too big for laps. I remembered soft breasts that molded to my child's body and kept me there without pushing away. That must have been a different woman from the one who had become a receptacle of babies and more babies, a different woman from the one who had no kind words, whose breasts were constantly hard and swollen with tears.

I wanted to weep, to hold my own mother, and tell her it couldn't be all that bad. If she just stopped having babies, she would be able to love us all again, and Dad and God. At sixteen, I was young and too inexperienced to know it was more complicated than that--or surely my parents would have figured it out.

I turned off the radio and heard a sound at the door. It was Aunt Sophie.

"Just having coffee?" she asked, as she walked in without knocking. Aunt Sophie never knocked. "Those damn kids of Lill's upstairs deliberately splashed me when I tried to walk up the driveway. I don't know how you can stand her or her brats renting upstairs, Del."

My mother didn't answer.

Uncle Joe must have been working that morning, and Aunt Sophie had nothing to do. I poured another cup of coffee and sat watching. She had left her raincoat in the corner--dripping on the floor. With the radio off, it was suddenly too quiet in the kitchen. The rain on the tin carport rapped loudly, and Aunt Sophie nodded to me over the milk she poured into her coffee--as though I was a conspirator.

"How are you feeling, Del?" she asked, not looking at my mother. Aunt Sophie had no children, so to her, mom's moping and her evil temper had no possible justification. Sometimes, it seemed that she was waiting to see if the sky would fall on her sister-in-law.

Mom didn't answer. She looked at Sophie and I waited, expecting one of Sophie's barren holier-than-thou judgments. The quiet lengthened uncomfortably.

"What are the kids up to today?"

"They're playing Monopoly," I answered. I wanted to spare myself the discomfort of Aunt Sophie not being answered, again.

We sat there for a while. Aunt Sophie asked if we had gotten any rain damage and I told her the basement had a foot or two of water, but since it had a dirt floor and was also a root cellar, we didn't think there would be any permanent damage. I told her we didn't intend to do anything about the clogged septic tank until the weather permitted it, either. That led her to a bit of gossip about the woman upstairs, as she referred to Lilly. It was Lilly's kids who had flushed some underwear down the toilet causing the problems. When I failed to answer, the small talk stopped and the three of us sat there. Finally, I excused myself. I didn't feel that I had to sit there in the hot seat, so I went to my bedroom and sat there straining my ears.

"Well Adele, surely you can get yourself together long enough to visit with me." The silence continued. "Lord, no wonder Stephan is fed up with you, if this is the way you act with him." I heard her walk to the sink and hoped she would leave soon.

"What would you know about Stephan and what he feels for me?" Mom's voice sounded clear and strong all of a sudden and my ears itched.

"I imagine, that's all. I think of the beautiful children God has given you and I'm ashamed that we're related. You don't even want your own children. You make me sick, Adele." I heard her put on her raincoat and was relieved.

"You want one, Sophie?"

"What?" Sophie's voice was filled with disbelief and shock.

"If you love kids so much, why not? Have one of mine. They're all good kids. Put up or shut up Sophie!"

"Listen, Del, I refuse to stay and listen to your abuse another minute." The door slammed, and soon after I heard mom shuffling back to bed.

I knew she would never give one of us away, but I sat there on my bed, dismayed that she would go that far to torment Aunt Sophie. The baby wasn't due for another month, but it was going to be a long month for all of us.

I knew this baby was not welcome. Aside from myself, the oldest, and perhaps my brother, Chris who was six years younger than me, none of them were welcome. There were so many babies. I sometimes thought it was a cruel game my parents played with each other, and some day, they would have a lot to answer for.

I stayed in my room. I was the only child who had his own bedroom, but that was because I chose to have privacy rather than physical comforts. My room had once been a sunporch, so I froze in the winter, baked in the summer. Today, I curled up under the eiderdown quilt my grandmother had given me and watched the rain running down the many panes of glass that enclosed the little room. I looked at the prism Anna had given me. It hung in the window closest to the head of my bed. No little flecks of color had been captured or bounced around on the floor as the dismal rain came down in torrents. Only the old linoleum covered the floor in a worn-out patternless blur. I closed myself off from the ugliness in the house, opened a book, and wrapped myself more tightly in my quilt. I always read stories with happy endings. That way, I could read, and forget I lived here, and become someone who wasn't me.

Anna's Journal --

When I looked out the window toward Paolo's I saw the river, and I was comforted knowing that he lived just upstream beyond the next curve in the road. It seemed to me that I had loved Paolo and his work forever. To me, they were inseparable. In the beginning of our relationship, I used to pick blue flowers like iris or hydrangea and arrange them in a vase in the window. It was our signal. I said anytime he saw those flowers he was welcome to stop by for dinner. Sometimes I used blue Kleenex and made those artificial flowers that are used for wedding cars. That made him nervous, but Paolo rarely turned down a dinner invitation.

There were times when I invited him to stay the night. I had convinced him that at my age it was safe, and friendly, and without obligation, but I could never convince him to stay until morning. He said that to stay the night would be too comfortable. Oftentimes, when he had gone home, I would stay awake and embroider. Once I embroidered a replica of one of his sculptures. It was only that one time, but I remember feeling a sudden confluence of our minds. At that moment, our points of view merged. How I loved him.

One night there was an electrical charge in the air that erupted in lightening and thunder when he had gone. I lay in bed, alone, wishing at my age that I could conceive a child. It was the evening that Julia walked home in the rain feeling sorry for herself, she told me. The house was very dark that night as I lay there looking toward the darkened window. I was startled when the lightening flashed, and I thought I saw Julia's face lighted in the window frame. I called to her, but no one answered. And when I finally managed to open the window, no one was there.

Anna --

There were times when Paolo would gaze at Anna as though frightened of his thoughts. When she visited she often posed for him. At times, he would walk up to her and touch her skin which was warm from the fire. Like a sleepwalker he would touch her until he was reassured that her warmth came from inside. Then, whatever reverie he was lost in would disappear behind an hypnotic smile. He would touch her to memorize her, to store up her light, to remember her curves during the days and nights when she was gone. She, in turn, would have given anything when he was like this.

One rain-dreary evening before the flood, when she had posed for a long time, he touched her in that trance that came over him, touched what he had just created in clay. His hands were rough and earthy and his eyes lost. Anna stood there for a while asking nothing from him, until he pulled her to him, and the compassion in her heart became tangled with his passion. The fine line that separated her from Paolo disappeared. She told Julia she often wondered what she meant to him, if she was more than just a lifeline tossed to a drowning man. He was a strong man when he wasn't fighting demon fears. This one night she wanted to feel his strong hands on her skin. She wanted to be caressed and touched as one who was beloved. She knew he would not change, that he would not cherish her. She wanted him to adore her, but that would never happen. Accepting this, she had still let herself love him. He was like the unleashed storm that night, demanding and clutching at her. And when they had made love, he rose from the carpet in front of the hearth with no sweet words or gentleness and dressed himself. Anna slipped into a robe, when she saw he wasn't coming back to her, and stared into the fire. Finally, she walked to the stove to ladle out the hot soup she had brought. She lit candles and insisted that he come to the table.

"I hope we are still friends, Paolo." She spoke quietly, not knowing what to expect from this man.

"Listen, Anna." He sounded agitated. "I can't even say thank you. I know you've offered me something special. You have waited around, trying to give me this love for years. But now do you see that I don't have anything of myself to give in return?"

To ease the tension, she poured the wine and stirred the soup. The soup was homemade with lots of vegetables and special herbs that she had brought from the monastery. The herbs she had planted and tended filled the room with their special healing scents. It was the only thing she could think of to do. Feed this man. He needed to be fed.

"I'm not sorry. You don't need to say anything. I am a bit old for this sort of thing, anyway." She didn't feel old, but maybe he did, she thought.

"Old? When I was your age I was still acting like a randy goat. Old? You don't understand."

He stood up and walked to a dark corner of the room. He heaved and pushed a large sculpture until it was standing in front of the fireplace. She watched as the fire softened its surfaces. It touched something in her that the years of love-making had not reached, something she did not understand. A stillness in the elusive curves made her want to reach out, to make its understanding hers.

It was a nude, a man. There was a quality in his naked and honest form that she had sought for years. She looked into Paolo's ravaged face and saw a man who wasn't always honest or good, a hard man who had struggled for everything he had learned.

"I like him. I must say, if I was looking for a lover I would choose this man."

"Why is that, Anna?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. It isn't just the great body." She laughed because Paolo's scrutiny made her uncomfortable.

"If it isn't his beautiful body, then why?"

"I think it's the way he is standing there, as though he was the whole world...the sun, the moon...everything."

"If he is complete already, why would you want him as a lover? What good would he be to you? Look at me, Anna."

Paolo stood near the fire. He moved closer to where she stared, pretending to be lost in thought. She didn't have to see his eyes to know that they rejected her love. Why did it have to be so complicated?

"Because I want that wholeness in my life. I want to end this everlasting loneliness." The time for total honesty had come. "I yearn for it so badly, I sometimes think it is killing me. Now you know. You also know that I love you."

Paolo dropped his shoulders and suddenly looked older. "I am just an old man, Anna. What you see in that statue is my own yearning. But it isn't a yearning for you. It isn't for you."

He turned his back to her and stood that way, so she wouldn't see the tears of loneliness and despair in his eyes.

"You are wrong, Paolo. I have come here for ten years pretending to bring only soup. I have seen my love reflected in your eyes, but you think my love isn't good enough for you, that your destiny is something greater than a mortal eccentric woman who loves you. Now, you look at me!" She spoke loudly, hysterical in the knowledge that he was not listening and nothing she said would reach his heart.

He did turn to look into her eyes eventually, but it was a shielded look, and she knew this was the end of her cherished hopes.

"Truly, I am sorry I hurt you. But you're right about one thing, since we are being honest tonight. I want you to understand this. You are not enough for me, Anna. And if you were honest with yourself, you would see that I am not enough for you, either. Maybe someday you will understand. I think you should be heading back to your place. We are both tired." He waited quietly for her to leave.

But Anna couldn't bring herself to leave so suddenly. "I am not asking you to marry me, for heaven's sake."

"Yes, you are. You are lonely. I am lonely. So there is a desire to drive away the loneliness." In a way she knew he was right.

"I'm sorry too, Paolo. After all these years...." They sat by the fire, both of them thinking their own thoughts until the fire grew dim and Paolo got up to put on some more logs.

"Don't ever be sorry, Anna. You don't need me. I am glad you have loved me. It has been one of my greatest joys these last few years. I would not have learned what I have, if you had not been around."

She sat listening to the fire and the river rushing so closely beyond the far side of the hearth as Paolo's voice joined with the two elements. She sat talking to the man she was certain she loved, hearing a surrender to the moment that she had never felt in his arms. She wondered if he shared her feelings of gratefulness for what had happened that evening. "You make me happy too, Paolo. So don't go and die on me yet, old man."

They both laughed. It was enough. Anna was content, suddenly, to share stories of the past with him. The awful tension was released. What was there to learn that went beyond love, she thought. Nothing. There was nothing more important to Anna than love. She believed that Paolo avoided commitment, but if he wanted to believe that physical love between a man and a woman somehow got in the way of his search, she was willing to go along with him.

Julia --

As I continue to drive the rental car slowly down Meadow Road, I stare, unblinking, at the passing scenery. When the car behind me blows its horn, I decide to pull over. So many images are assaulting my memory that I thought had been suppressed. The trees overhead are like a temple arch. They create feelings of awe and reverence. This archway by the roadside, for instance, was the passage to Anna's place. My moods were always changed after I went through it. In spring, the new green buds let through a light and beauty. In summer, lush shade and mystery pervaded the roadside. In winter, a world of white heavy shadows waited in the passage. And in autumn, I changed and grew. The river was lazy along this stretch of road. It didn't roar and thrash about as it did in the ravine near Anna's house. Here, it made beckoning sounds, spoke in whispers, and gathered its own reflection. I can still hear it flowing, a channel of echoes.

The only time Nathan walked me home from school was just before his graduation. It was that same summer when the flood changed our lives. I remember the day clearly. I told him that an artist could never copy the idyllic scene by the river. He laughed and said I didn't know the first thing about art or artists. We had stopped to sit on large stones in the middle of the lazy shallow stream. It was a sunny day that smelled warm and full like summer. I was lazing back on a flat gray rock watching Nathan as he clicked his camera at leaves, stone shadows, and water reflections. Dazzling summer shadows filled my eyes, so I closed them and began to wish that Nathan would see me as more than a camera image. I had a vision of my own photo portrait dissolving in developing solution, overexposed to his impersonal lie-detector eyes. I had the constant urge to confess something when I was with him, anything to get his attention. I opened my eyes suddenly and caught a look of intense yearning cross Nathan's face. He tried to hide it, but it was too late. I had seen it, and I was old enough to recognize it. I became wise beyond my years.

Stone walls, wild yarrow, cranberry hedges, and blackberry bushes, wild grapevines, and cornfields, newspaper boxes on Crane Hollow Road, stain-glassed Episcopal churches, and steepled Congregational churches, cattails, and sticky caramel apples, cups of raspberries at craft fairs, and the finest Fitz and Floyd porcelain china: like a kaleidoscope, the scenes slipped and intermingled with the sunlit leaves overhead. The intensity between us was a vivid colorful thread of joy. I wanted to recite a love poem and speak aloud the tender feelings I had kept inside for so long. I wanted to share them with Nathan who had always seemed distant and cold, Nathan who was brought up in an austere New England Calvinist church, whose relatives had probably helped burn witches and boycott tea. Nathan never understood my lack of confidence or shyness. He was my beautiful arrogant Nathan who took his birthright for granted. He wore his jeans on his hips, and his hair to his shoulders to rebel against values that I had yet to possess. He was my dear Nathan who took for granted that I would love him because he had never been unloved. While I knew all this, and knew that I was too innocent for Nathan, I was not aware enough to hold him or understand his world.

Anna's Journal --

I describe certain experiences as a prelude to the storm. By the time Julia had reached her teens, for instance, I knew that life would never be easy for her. Her insight was confined to details, one by one. Julia's world was a dream world that shielded her from pain.

"There are tulips near the mailbox this year," she might exclaim, or "When did you embroider the lovely sampler hanging in the hallway?" The tulip bulbs were planted several years before and the embroidery--well, I could have sworn she was right here watching me nearly half the time as I stitched it.

During her teens she went to sleep. I think she dreamed of escape or of being rescued by Prince Charming. She was like a caged bird. There were times when I encouraged her dreams of escape because I thought she needed to see more of the world before she could wake up.

The view I had of the world through my own window was heavily wooded. The trees stood tall and straight, side by side. Though I looked at them through the window, I imagined that a bird perched at the top of one of them would have quite a different view. My own illusions and the view from my window were finely focused. As I studied the trees during the rain, I saw them swell with water. They stood silently, heavily, as rain ran and whispered, like holy words, down their trunks and into the earth at their roots.

Anna --

Anna opened her eyes, shut them, then opened them, again. Still, it was dark. It was always dark in her cell-like room, its one small window blocked by the thick bough of a spruce tree that scraped the side of the house. The bedroom walls were made of bare stone, wet, and sweating from the dampness that permeated the house. It had been raining for two weeks and the town was half under water. Therefore, what was a mere trickle of water oozing through the walls when the house was solid and safe, far above the river?

It wasn't easy to crawl from beneath her warm handmade quilt. Once, it had the soft sheen and luxury of yellow satin. Now, it was a faded sepia color, droplet spotted, and touched with rust. Anna had sewed every seam by hand and it was still useful and comfortable. To get out of bed she had to touch the bare floor, go out to the kitchen to light the wood stove, then stand there naked while dampness escaped the clothes she would wear. She had to think of something else, steel herself from the damp walls, protect herself with her own inner light.

She hurried into the kitchen to light the stove. The fire leaped up, and crackled, and soon its glow warmed her skin. She filled the kettle to heat on the stove and opened the window over the sink to breathe in the cool morning air. It was still dark. The heavy rain made it impossible to tell the time of morning. She washed quickly and changed into an old pair of woollen pants and a flannel shirt. The rescue crews would be out that day, and she wanted to be there to help. She thought of the suffering and unhappiness she knew would be present in the flooded streets. As she knelt in the small kitchen on a thick Tibetan carpet, a prayer rug that had been given to her by her friend, Sylvia, she prepared herself for the day.

She wondered where Sylvia was these days. They had come from Europe together on a large ship, and Sylvia had tried to convince her to accompany her farther. She said she was going on to western Canada to build an ashram, a retreat and study center for yoga. She wanted Anna to go with her. They had been similar in so many ways: the same family backgrounds, married to wealthy men, leaving their homeland, widowed, hurt, lucky to get out alive. Sylvia had no one. Anna had no one. Sylvia was a good woman, yet, when she asked Anna to go with her, Anna stopped her journey in New England. In the end, their destinies were not the same, but Anna thought of her often.

As special as the prayer rug was, the months living together in Montreal had been even more special. Sylvia's most precious gift had been her example. She lived in the present and had a reverent worship of life. There was no more looking back to what she had left behind. Today there would be others needing help, and Anna would be there with them as Sylvia had been with her. For all that she had received, she wanted to give in return. But first, she knelt and prayed for strength and courage.

"Oh Mother," she breathed deeply. "Holy Mother of compassion," she whispered. The sound of the rain that fell along the stone path near the eaves accompanied her breathing. The smell of geraniums at the open window filled the morning air. Their colors were beautiful bright strokes--outlined against a forest green canvas and framed by the window.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the back door. It was a strong rapping on the curtained, glass pane. The unexpected sound electrified the small kitchen as Anna struggled from her knees to bring herself out of her thoughts. When she answered the door, a young man stood there awkwardly, his slicker dripping with rain, his hood pushed back from his face. His straight, dark hair was long and unkempt, his blue eyes wild with restlessness.

"My name is Nathan, I'm a friend of Julia's. Are you Anna?"

"Yes, come in, Nathan."

"Sure. Thanks." He stepped into the hallway off the kitchen and glanced at the warm stove with the prayer rug before it.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"No, please, take off your coat. I was just about to have some coffee."

Nathan slipped out of the wet jacket and left it on a wall hook in the hall.

"So what brings you out so early in all this rain?" Anna looked at him over her shoulder as she took down an extra bowl and cup from the cupboard. She liked the looks of this boy whose name she had heard Julia mention so often. His eyes seemed to take in everything and they were filled with experiences far beyond his years.

"I'm going out with the rescue team this morning. Julia said you were going out, too, so I thought maybe we could be partners."

"Of course, why not?"

"Besides, I wanted to meet you. I've been wanting to for a long time."

"Let's have some breakfast first, then we'll go."

"I've had breakfast, but I don't mind having some more."

"So why haven't we met before, Nathan?"

"Oh, I don't know. There was always something. I always had the feeling Julia didn't want me to meet you. And of course, there was the evening we stopped by, but you weren't home. I insisted on coming in anyway, you know, then Julia was mad."

"I see."

He looked up at Anna through dark lashes, watching her reaction.

He's honest, she thought, painfully honest. "So what is it about my house that attracts you?"

"You do."

"Oh?" Anna watched him quietly and waited.

"Well, you're a friend of Paolo's and...I paint, you see, and...my curiosity got the best of me. I don't have any friends who paint and...."

"I understand, Nathan. I do understand." She paused to consider what he was trying to tell her. "So...eat the cereal and we'll go. Maybe another day you'll come for a long visit and we'll talk about the things we love. Perhaps you would like me to look at your work. And perhaps you would enjoy meeting Paolo. He isn't a complete hermit, you know."

Nathan looked surprised, but pleased. "Would you really introduce us?"

"Yes, I think so."

They finished breakfast, and Anna studied him while they ate. They listened to the radio for rescue alerts and tried to imagine what the center of town looked like under water. People were trapped, despite serious warnings for the last two days. Many had refused to leave their homes and held on to their worldly possessions, clinging to them instead of real lifelines. Now, they were faced by the bleak truth of the disaster. Nathan looked up, and smiled, and Anna knew she had made a new friend. There were two young people in her life, now. It made life seem full.

She looked closely at her hands. They were skinny hands holding a cup of coffee for a last sip to keep warm. They were getting-old hands, finely lined with work and holding on. She opened her right hand, palm up, outstretched. It was nervously etched. When she was younger, she had always meant to have her palms read. After putting down the coffee, she stood there one last minute in her heavy slicker before starting out the door with Nathan. Her damp halo of hair curled wildly around her face as she headed down Meadow Road with Nathan.

She thanked God for her damp stone and mortar house. It reminded her of Europe. It would never wash away or cave in on her head. No matter what else, she had worked hard and paid for it and there would always be this roof overhead.

Bundled in boots and slicker, Nathan and Anna walked toward town. The crews would meet at the North End. There was damage there, but the area wasn't nearly as devastated as the South End which was now flooded by the Naugatuck River.

Angry water had spilled through town, washed away bridges and roadways, and caused havoc in the factories along the river, leaving scars and victims. Radio bulletins had kept Anna awake until late in the night. She imagined the crumpled concrete and the rubble to be like bomb damage. No one had believed that Hurricane Diana's effects would reach this far north. But the river had been steadily rising, and rose alarmingly until the middle of the night, when it overflowed. In the city center, fourteen stores had been washed away in the darkness: Chester's Army-Navy, Squire's Paint and Glass, Singer's Clothing, Considine's Diner, Sears Roebuck & Co., Montgomery Ward, Towne Furriers, and Dick's Sweet Shoppe. The bus station was gone, a section of the New Haven Railroad track uprooted. People had gathered in tiny knots in front of the wreckage by the Sylvania Television store, its 'Movie-Clear' sign turned off and lying in the street, looking for assurance that they were awake and that this was no dream.

Early that morning, the town had been without electrical power, water, or gas. As she and Nathan left Meadow Road, they splashed through murky water that came to their ankles. They walked arm in arm for support. Soon they were surrounded by canned goods and filth that floated at their feet. The arm of a mannequin, flesh-toned and muddy, lay washed up in the shallow water. Scraps of lumber and debris lay strewn about, forgotten and forlorn. They were to meet the emergency rescue crews at the North End, where state police and civil defense units had been gathered all night, to search for the homeless.

Light seeped dimly through many cloud layers after so much rain for so many days--followed by hurricane winds. Anna couldn't help wondering if it was some sort of punishment on the countryside and the town. In the beginning the rain felt like tears, a great sorrow wept upon the town, but the longer it continued, the more angry and unrelenting the water sounded.

Julia --

Paolo's place was on the riverside of Meadow Road, across the street, and down the embankment from my house. I don't ever remember his dilapidated house not being there. The river, a gurgling trout stream, ran beside it. If there was such a thing as an unsightly premise act in those days, his place would not have been allowed to stand. But there it was, beside the river with its chicken coops and rabbit hutches. Another shack, nearly the size of his house, was used as a barn for the goats. There was a dog house, but the dog came and went in the main house along with several cats. Canary cages were attached to the side of the house near a small window. And high grapevine trellises surrounded the half acre lot, where Paolo lived like a hermit.

Each day he left the house and pulled a wagon up Meadow Road to a natural spring. He filled large casks with fresh water, then pulled them back down the road to the residential areas of town. There, his regular customers bought the water for a few cents a gallon. When the water was gone, he pulled the wagon down to the 'Stop and Save' delivery entrance. He had an arrangement with the store manager to take away the week old produce and stale bakery items. He piled loaves of bread, bags of doughnuts, and cakes with hard icing into his wagon. Cabbages, old wilted lettuces, soggy tomatoes, and meats edged with green mold were added to the pile. He pulled the laden wagon home to his waiting animals, keeping some of the food for himself. It was then that he settled down to the sculpture work that he loved.

In summer, he worked in his backyard beside the river. In winter, I never saw much of him unless I walked home with him as he slowly pulled the water wagon. Most times, I was too impatient, but when we did walk home together, I was rewarded with a bowl of 'caffe latte' and a few stale doughnuts. There was always the smell of garlic, olive oil, and tomatoes stewing for a pasta sauce--a comforting smell. As he worked in his one room house, if I was very quiet, he would let me sit and watch. One quiet afternoon, I listened with growing concern to Paolo's nearly incoherent mumbling as he talked to his creations.

"This one! This one will be my grave marker, Julia."

I watched his hands smoothing the stone surface and was startled to recognize Paolo's face. Moments before, I would have sworn there was no tangible form in the stone. Now it was mask-like, emerging into life.

"They'll bury me in Riverside Cemetery," he continued. "And you can stand watch." He patted the lifelike rock.

That same day, Paolo told me that listening to the river gave him answers. The river spoke to him and he answered back. "In Italian!" He laughed. He said he sometimes threw a few curses into the river, knowing they would return to curse him someday. This kind of talk frightened me. I think he liked to test himself that way because his eyes took on a hollow stare. He knew the river was greedy, that it would take and take until it overflowed. That is where he discarded all the stone chips after sculpting, in the river. They made up a growing beach of sharp points that kept the neighborhood kids from swimming where it was deep and dangerous.

Paolo's winter sculpture was created differently. Instead of chipping and chiselling, he molded and shaped the human body from clay.

"Humans are like clay," he told me, "but more interesting...unpredictable and beautiful...at times."

Once he stood in front of the hearth that nearly covered one wall, molding and caressing the body of a nude woman. She reminded me of Anna.

"Someday you will understand, perhaps. She is beautiful...but not enough."

I did not dwell on this comment. Paolo was gruff and there were times when he made me nervous. He was a big man from the mountains with strong classic features and soulful eyes. Once, I told him about my great-grandfather, the stone mason from Switzerland, who had built Trinity Church. The church was his first commission in town when he arrived at the turn of the century. Paolo treated me like a special person after that, as though genetic transference gave me special cause to appreciate the work he did. I did love to watch him work, but I never learned much more about the man or his past. He must have been close to seventy, old enough to be my grandfather, so I was always respectful.

I was also quite timid beside his fierce energy. I knew a lot about anger, knew when it hovered in the air. I had watched my parents simmer with it for years. I was accustomed to a great deal of tension and waited for outbursts from him that never happened. I knew he was fighting an important battle, but I didn't know who he was fighting. He was alone in the world as far as I could see, a wonderful artist, despite the anger and greed in his heart that he claimed only the river could remove. He said his grief came from a desire for fame. It possessed him at times--in his desire to vindicate himself to his family. He tortured himself with this flaw and would not let it go. But

Paolo was generous, and I was never sent home empty-handed. There was inevitably a plant from the window sill or a sack of stale doughnuts for the kids. He dispensed with his treasures like a king.

I knew Anna visited him often, particularly in the closed-in isolation of winter nights. She told me years later that she often posed for him during those long evenings in front of a blazing hearth. He was fighting a terrible demon, and sometimes, as the fire caught in his eyes, she could see him losing the struggle. At times, she felt that she was the only one who stood between the man who worked so intensely and the doom chiselled on his brow.

Anna's Journal --

My dreams are my visions. Each one is a single painted image that I want to frame and make real. That is because the night has become very important to me. I realize that I grow just as much at night, when I acknowledge my dreams, as I do during the day. Without the night, one third of my life is invalidated.

I have tried to tell Julia of the importance of her dreams, but she does not want to talk about them. She says they either frighten her, or she cannot remember them.

She says the dream she remembers most is one in which she is having a brain operation. She can feel the surgeons open her skull and begin to probe. Then there are beautiful colors and swirling circles of light. During the operation, she dies and all goes black--until she is left in the dark with only the remembered sound of her own voice as it calls to her.

"We can take the dream apart and analyze it if it bothers you," I say. "It may just be the not-knowing that haunts you. Dreams are seldom what they seem. And dreams change, Julia. They only control you when they remain unknown." Somehow, she must learn to trust her own dreams.

Anna --

In the middle of a dark night during the flood, Anna awoke from a dream. She stretched slowly, but stayed in bed as she remembered. She was surrounded by crystal eyes, narrowed apertures of camera lenses, snake eyes, eagle eyes. A tiny bird flew by, and she recognized its song. It was a child's song that came from a small sparrow, the sparrow that never returned to nest in the bushes by the path. Then, suddenly, she and the sparrow were high above the earth, peering down through a hole in a cloud. The dream continued. She was given the job of night watchman, but she was blind. The sparrow joined her and repeated, "Do not listen with your eyes. Do not listen with your eyes."

She stayed in bed and listened to the sounds of the night accompanied by the background music of rainfall. It fell relentlessly. The dream made her nervous because the eyes had been evoked in her dreamspace. She slipped into a sweater and warm pants, wrapped a waterproof cape around her shoulders, and covered her head with its hood. Feeling invisible in the dark cloak, she hiked up through the woods in her backyard to the Pines at the hilltop. The river was far below and its torrent of sound was dimmed. The Pines was a sacred place that had been given its name by Julia. It was hushed by a carpet of pine needles and surrounded by the stone wall of a long forgotten homestead. The trees there were among the tallest and oldest in the Berkshires. They reached up stoically to curve against the night sky.

The dream had beckoned her outside and up the hill, her rhythmic stride different tonight, as though she had learned a new walk. She stood in the center of the pine circle, watchful, exploring the vast and holy quiet. The rain fell silently there.

Shivering and chilled, Anna retraced her steps down the hill. The eyes that had followed her into her dream were not present in the darkness. The house, when she reached it, was a refuge from the starless sky.

Julia --

One day, not long after my last day in the tobacco fields, Cynthia Easton and Karen Howells phoned. They were inseparable in high school and quite popular. They seldom asked anyone to join them, so I was flattered when they asked if I would like to go downtown to shop for school clothes. Naturally, I was suddenly uncomfortable. I had never shopped for school clothes. The few I owned were handmade, but I did have my last pay check. Having that much money in my top drawer made me brave; I told them I'd love to go.

We met at the bus stop on the corner of Prospect Street and South Main and got off at the green by the post office. Cynthia wanted to mail a few letters before we began browsing through the small shops and more elegant department stores. I thought of my pay check and how hard I had worked in the mud and rain to earn it. I was not planning to spend it unless I saw something I needed. I had given myself a good talking to after the girls had invited me to shop and reminded myself that I could never dress as smartly as they did, not if I spent an entire summer's pay. When I remembered last week and all that rain, a simple dress did not seem like equal exchange for what I had been through.

Cynthia was talking. "And so I told him I wanted to be either a prude or a prostitute when I grew up. Right now, I'm working on the prude. That stilted the conversation for the evening. Besides, I told him not to look so glum, I really do like guys from Choate better than Deerfield. Daddy wants me to marry Harvard someday. He'll just die if I marry someone from Yale."

Deerfield. Choate. What kind of schools were they? I had never heard of them, but suddenly I felt shy and awkward. I looked down at my dripping umbrella and over at Karen's pressed raincoat. It was a bright woodsy green and her umbrella was pink and green striped to match. Her rain boots were shiny plastic, while I had black rubbers over my oxfords. My skirt was water-soaked along the hem because I had outgrown my raincoat and had walked down Meadow Road to meet them. The bus did not go as far as my house back then.

"I told Daddy I was going to major in French at college so I could study in Paris and have a little fun there before settling down with two-point-five brats." Karen waved her fine-boned hand and brushed her curly blond hair behind one ear. Her nails were manicured and painted a delicate pink.

I clenched my hands inside my sweater pockets, wishing the tobacco stains would disappear and no one would notice the blister inside my thumbs from stringing plants. Prude or prostitute, Yale or Harvard, what did these girls know about women who were willing to be seduced behind sheds in the tobacco fields or how it felt to be sexually attacked? I shuddered.

"Are you cold, Julia? Why didn't you wear your raincoat?"

"I'm not cold, just thinking," I answered.

"Well, it's nice and warm in the post office, and I have to duck in there for a second," Cynthia said.

The post office. Suddenly, I felt my cheeks burn. I thought of Anna and hoped she wouldn't be there.

They used to give Anna that long red, white, and blue wrap around apron to wear, and she was always there with a broom, or a long-handled dust pan, or a mop and soap bucket--carefully washing the marble floor. Sometimes, she was down on her hands and knees polishing it. Other times, she emptied waste baskets, wiped off letter tables, or filled blackened ink wells. Every word echoed in that building; the ceiling was high-vaulted and classic. Most people walked reverently through the long building or talked in hushed elevator tones. There were times when she worked behind the wickets in the mail room, sweeping, and dusting, and occasionally sorting mail during the rush seasons. But that wasn't where she was that day. Anna was there in the lobby with a long-handled dust pan, and I pretended I didn't see her.

We walked to the inside mailbox beside the wicket and Cynthia bought stamps. Then we stood in a tight group laughing noisily at nothing, just acting immature, pretending we were sophisticated. I saw Anna from the corner of my eye. At first she approached us with a welcoming smile.

I turned to fidget with the closed umbrella in my hand. What I really felt like doing was removing my wet rubber boots, so I wouldn't mess the floor that I knew she had worked so hard to keep clean. I saw her happy expression turn to puzzlement before she walked back to her sweeper, shoulders sloped and unassuming. How I cried out inside at my own treachery. But something small and evil stayed with me.

When Cynthia had finished her business at the wicket, we walked arm in arm toward the exit, and there stood Anna, too close to ignore.

"Oh, hello Anna." I acted surprised to see her and became tongue tied.

"Why don't you introduce us to your friend?" Karen nudged Cynthia and winked at me. I still couldn't speak.

"My name is Anna. I'm a neighbor of Julia's." Anna put out her hand quite naturally and shook hands with the girls. She turned a terrible ordeal into a simple introduction. Soon after, we were out the door and I was listening to the girls laugh, but I didn't join them, didn't understand their private joke.

"Isn't she strange? Is she really a neighbor of yours, Julia?"

I nodded, saying nothing.

"We always see her walking somewhere, don't we Cynthia?" Karen stopped to fix her scarf, while Cynthia held her umbrella. "Wasn't she married to a Nazi during the war?"

"I really don't know," I answered.

"Well, my dad said to keep away from her because she's pretty odd. Not to mention what she may have been like in the past."

"She seems all right," I shrugged.

"Funny, we didn't know she was your neighbor...."

I listened quietly and waited for them to change the subject, thinking I should have been named Judas instead of Julia. I wanted to go home and cry from the pain of the knife I had stabbed into my own heart.

Anna was so beautiful in my eyes, but my eyes were not attached to my inner vision. I made no connections to the space within me, so I could not trust what I saw when I watched her and wished to imitate her. Her clear, blue eyes were intense and open, her hair, wild and unusually gray for someone in her late-forties. It curled wherever it wished, the effect, a halo around her face. She was always tanned from being outdoors. It was better to walk, Anna said, so she was strong, and skinny, and the utilitarian shoes she wore were a bit comical with her woollen dirndl skirts. They were too big and the white-starched blouses she wore were threadbare. Her clothes were out of fashion, but I liked the way she wore them.

The spirit of giving is in the spirit and can never be measured. And what Anna gave to me can never be measured. She used to work so hard. But I did not think of her as a cleaning lady, did not want to think of her in that way. The fact that she did not talk about her work, did not complain, gave her a certain aura. I imagined her as many things in my cherished illusions, everything except a humble woman, a hard worker, a human being committed to a life of selfless service.

Anna's Journal --

Betrayal is difficult to understand. There must have been a moment when Julia found that I had gone that felt like betrayal. The issue, however, needs a closer look. When I see images that are sharp-edged, I know that those edges are chiselled from the center. When I recall Julia's portrait from memory, I have to outline her profile from deep within myself. Whatever distortions occur, I take to indicate areas of Julia that I have not yet come to know. That is why I kept her portrait in place--so I could add to, or work over, the first impression. I was always making changes. Julia's face became my journal. The changes I made helped me to learn as much about myself as I did about Julia. I tried never to betray the essence of her image.

Merely leaving someone's life is not a betrayal. Betrayal involves the center not the outline. This is what Julia did not understand. To betray is to deny. It is to say, "I never knew that child. I was never that person's friend." It is to say, "I once loved you, but no longer love you." That is betrayal. That is what Judas did to Christ.

Anna --

Filthy water collected behind layers of stained and flowered wallpaper. It dripped from a soggy gray army blanket on the metal cot that had been pushed to the center of the front room. The floors were buried in silt, while bottles, recently filled with cheap whiskey, now filled with murky flood water, littered the hallway.

Darman's Boarding House was near the river, behind the Brass Mill. The place was shabby and rat-infested in the best of times, its foundations dank and shaky. Anna stared at the blotchy walls. Once this place had been elegant. Remembered in faded daguerrotypes at the Historical Society Library, these rooms had been part of a tavern when the town was first settled. The large front room that now smelled of refuse was once cleared for dancing, its oak floors made smooth by slippered feet. It was a shame the building had never been kept up or restored. The history of the city, its heart, once lived here. But it was too late now. When the flood receded, the place was sure to be condemned.

Anna had spent many afternoons in the dusty, solemn, and empty Historical Society, lost in the wonder of discovering her new country. She didn't think it odd that no one else sat in the musty rooms or that the librarian was old and deaf. To most people, it did not matter that the ruined boarding house would never again be a center where cups of cider and ale were once shared in friendship.

Nathan, now her rescue partner, was moving around upstairs, checking the bedrooms. She heard a noise that sounded as though it came from a back room and shuddered, thinking of rats upstairs. Nathan's footsteps moved steadily. He was nearly through with his inspection. She moved quietly down the hallway toward the back of the building. Nathan had asked her to be careful because the building backed on the river and some of the rooms might have been undermined by water. With tentative fearful steps, she continued down the hallway. Nathan's footsteps echoed on the stairs, giving her confidence. The last room down the hall was an old pantry. Her first glance took in the high ceilings. Cupboards were swung open to reveal bulk quantities of staples sitting solidly on upper shelves. The noise had come from this room, and her eyes sought the disturbance.

She called out to Nathan who was already behind her now, staring down in disbelief. On the floor, lying there in the stench and sodden decay, eyes open, staring blankly beyond the peeled plaster ceiling and bare light bulb fixture, was Paolo. Nathan bent down to see if the old man was alive and Anna knelt next to him, barely breathing. She noticed Paolo's bare feet and saw the swollen purple of one foot seeping upward to the ankle, bloated and gray.

"My God, help him," she whispered. "He doesn't look like he's going to make it."

Nathan stood there, white with shock.

"Go. Get out of here. Get one of the men to radio the helicopter teams. I'll get him covered...." Anna looked at her beloved friend. His nearness to death was shocking.

"Please go, Nathan. I'll stay here with him."

In spirit, she untied the boat with Nathan and rowed as fast as possible to the emergency station, fighting wave after wave of nausea, while in reality she knelt next to Paolo's dying body and prayed that he wouldn't leave her.

It was only later, when the helicopter team had taken over and he was in competent hands that she leaned closer to Paolo, wanting to see his beloved face. They were taking him from the boarding house on a stretcher. She could not understand how he had come to be at the boarding house when he could have been with her. He was through with his search for fame she thought bitterly as she looked around her. Ironic, that his end should happen in such a place. She thought he made an effort to regain consciousness as the glassy staring eyes flickered briefly with recognition, then closed.

She stood there on the top steps of the porch in high boots and baggy woolen trousers. The pants hung loosely, belted tightly to keep them from slipping off her skinny hips. The heavy slicker pulled at her frail shoulders as she watched the medics take him away. Anna shook her head. There was too much to learn in a lifetime, too much to learn and so little time.

She stood there beside Nathan and watched as the debris floated past, bumped into the railings of the porch, or caught for a time on the steps. She stepped down the stairs to retrieve a little girl's dress. It was muddied and torn. She held it up, then let it drop back into the water. Nathan untied the boat. She got in and sat quietly as he rowed to the next building. It was full dawn, and her face glowed when silver light touched on her unruly curls and settled on her greying hair. The white circles that surrounded her wide blue eyes stretched tightly across her cheekbones.

Nathan stared at her face and wondered what it was about it that gave off the feeling of agelessness and peace. He couldn't guess at her age or her feelings for Paolo, but her face was like a window of inspiration. He wished he could capture Anna's spirit on canvas, haloed and framed, an expression of serenity in the midst of catastrophe.

"I won't be able to introduce you to him, Nathan. Not ever," she whispered.

Julia --

Many places on Main Street did not exist thirty years ago. The reservoir was still being built when I left. Driving back to the center of town, I stop near the center green and park across from the bus depot. I inquire about my missing luggage--which has been found. While the ticket agent is getting the bag, I realize how many things I have never seen in this town. For one thing, there were only dairy farms and residential homes on Meadow Road when I lived here. I wonder what happened to the Johnson place. During the flood it went completely under water and the cows were taken to higher ground, but the buildings had been a mess long before the flood struck. I never thought much about what was happening to other people in those days. Maybe I was too young, or too confused, or too self-centered to be concerned beyond my own circle of family and friends.

The ticket agent in the bus depot walks to the door, chewing tobacco, and warming to his complaints about the government. "People in town were considerin' a small airport out that way a few years back, but the damn gov'ment tells us there's regulations about bein' too close to the resevoir."

"Maybe the other side of town?" I offer an opinion.

"Never should be takin' all that gov'ment money, then we wouldn't need all this dictatin' to," he mutters. "I'll get your bag an' help you put it in the car, ma'am."

Just then, a local bus stops at the depot. It is painted like a patriotic toy: red, white, and blue stripes with a white sign printed in red on the front. My brother, Chris, wrote to tell me that the buses had been painted for the town's bicentennial celebrations last year. It has only one passenger. The driver watches me in his mirror.

"All set ma'am."

I get into the rental car, again, and drive slowly up Main Street.

I try to relax and look at the view as I head North, past the North End shopping district. I see that Jacob's Ice Cream Parlor is still there. The place has been renovated until it is modern and clean. It used to be dark and cool with a wide-planked wooden floor. The windows have been replaced to make the place light and airy. It must be his son who runs the place. Mr. Jacob used to wear a dirty apron, but taking his place are several young waitresses dressed in matching aprons and hats. Ronda's Knit Shop is gone. There is an empty-looking deli in its place. I can't imagine a deli breaking even in this town unless they sell Polish Kolbassa, Genoa salami, and Irish corned beef. Someone could have been smart enough to figure it out, but it does not look like it. Holman's Bakery is gone. I wonder about Carl Holman and shake my head. Chris sent me a newspaper clipping when Holman was charged with molesting the Karchinski girl a few years back. What he was like thirty years ago doesn't seem relevant anymore. In place of his bakery is a Christmas shop. I wonder what else they sell to stay in business. It is spring, but there are no Easter displays in the window. The shop brings back memories of the town at Christmas. Each year we waited for hours in the freezing cold for a chance to visit with the elves who worked at the Christmas Village. We lined up near outdoor bonfires, drank hot chocolate, thought of Rudolph waiting with lipstick on his nose, and carefully printed our list of Christmas wishes.

Even then, we knew that Santa rarely granted wishes.

North Main is less residential than it used to be. Everything has been commercialized and made quaint. I wonder if it was all done for the town's bicentennial. Chris said everyone in town went mad the year before. People, who knew no history and never read, demanded lists of books from the library. The Historical Society had such an alarming number of tours and questions that ninety-year-old Mrs. Baldwin was hard put to answer them. They had to hire someone to take her place.

I notice that one of the shops has a fortune teller's sign in the window of the door. It is a tea room. Things have certainly changed. I remember that Anna was once considered eccentric.

I pass the rotary where North Main converges with Meadow Road. The laundromat behind the gas station is gone. My memory of the place is suddenly so vivid I wonder how I ever forgot it. Finding that memory is like finding a piece of that puzzle which is my life. The missing laundromat reminds me of Nathan.

One night, soon after our visit to Tanglewood, I waited for Nathan to pick me up. It was raining hard. I didn't know beforehand that we were going out without a car. But somehow, with his nautical slicker and my umbrella, we managed to walk down Meadow Road in the pouring rain. As we were about to pass Anna's house, Nathan insisted that he wanted to meet her. We knocked on the back door, but no one was home. Then, we did something I am not proud to admit, which is why I am making excuses for myself. When no one answered the door, we walked in, first through the kitchen, then into the living room. I felt like a criminal. The room was darkened and unwelcome without Anna there. Nathan studied the embroidery and painted plates hanging on the walls and criticized them.

"Look at these sketches. I think they're supposed to be you. They look like death."

That scared me more than anything, but it gave me the nerve to get angry.

"I want to leave!"

"What's the big hurry?" he asked in that infuriating way he had.

"I don't want to be here. It's a private house."

"I'll say. Dreary is more like it."

"And I won't stand here and listen to you criticize this house or Anna."

"Listen, it isn't all that bad. I mean, I still want to meet her."

"Well, tough! Meet her yourself." All my guilt was coming out, misdirected and angry.

We left soon after and continued to walk down the road. I couldn't imagine how I was going to get through the whole evening. I adored Nathan. I had from the moment I met him, but he seemed so much older and was about to leave home at the end of summer for an art school in Boston. It was only our second official date, and I felt I didn't measure up to his standards. Being with me might have been a way to put in time until summer vacation was finished. Sometimes, as I walked with him, I knew he was very far away, painting, or thinking thoughts that I could not understand, could not articulate even if I did understand. Art was his whole life, even then. He is famous, now. The Whitney, The Museum of Modern Art, The Metropolitan: all of them have his paintings in their private collections. He was Anna's kind of person, and on some level I was glad she was not home to meet him that night because I was jealous. I wanted to be Anna's special friend, didn't want to compete for her love, and I knew she would have loved the artist in Nathan.

The turbulent sound of the river below followed us as we continued to walk down Meadow Road. Hearing confusion and rage from the ravine made it easier to feel justified in my bad mood. It was less terrifying than facing my more honest feelings: the yearning, the fear of intimacy, the love I felt for Nathan.

That evening was dreadful. The pizza was indigestible, the rain was relentless, and my hair was a mess. Surely, I thought, nothing else could go wrong. I had taken my hair down from its braid and tried to curl it. I wanted to look beautiful that night. But my hair was heavy and oriental-straight, and when it got wet it was wild. I sat there with a piece of pizza, pushing my hair away from my face. I was awkward and out of my depth. As soon as I took my last bite, Nathan stood up to pay the bill.

"Let's get out of here." I was being taken home early.

"Are you angry at me?" I wanted to cry.

"I'm taking you home. I can't stand this."

He might as well have said he couldn't stand me. It was a relief to get back out in the rain where tears could be camouflaged. By the time we got to the rotary, we were out of breath and soaking wet.

"Let's stop by the laundromat and get dry." Nathan laughed at his own pun, and I began to feel that I was being too serious.

The laundromat was empty at that time of night, quiet and still. Nathan took my hand and pulled me to the back room where the soap and fabric softeners were sold. Then suddenly, he was holding me close, whispering words of love in my ears that made me blush and feel hot all over. He touched me everywhere, and I let him. I wanted to tell him I loved him, but the words stuck in my throat. I didn't want to sound young and inexperienced. Then, looking around at the empty pop bottles and the waste bin full to overflowing, the balls of lint on the floor, and the spilled soap powder, I couldn't give him what he was asking for, couldn't find the way to tell him. I would have died for him, but I'd be damned if I'd make love in a laundromat or any place else that was shabby and unequal to my feelings.

"Stop." I finally managed to open my mouth. "I'm afraid, Nathan."

It wasn't true. In some way I think Nathan knew I could never be afraid of him.

"What's the matter, babe? Isn't a down-and-out artist enough for you?"

Where had he come up with that idea? I heard his angry voice echo against empty open dryers and I was filled with disgust.

"You don't understand. You don't know me well enough and I don't know you. Take me home, Nathan."

Well, he didn't take me home. He told me I could walk by myself and I did. He also said that if he had known he was taking out a baby, he would never have wasted his time.

"Grow up." Those were his last words to me that summer. "Grow up."

I have grown up, Anna. I have spent my life untangling my own myths. I sometimes wonder if it was a case of being simply unaware or a case of hiding from my own powerful awareness. The shabby laundromat was not the problem that night. It was the love I thought was not returned, the second place I would have had to take in Nathan's heart. We saw each other, occasionally, for years afterward. But he was not in love with me the way I was in love with him. Now, I wonder if it is greed, to want it all, the best of everything and everyone? I have always wanted so much.

I walked up Meadow Road, alone, knowing that I wouldn't see Nathan again for a long time, perhaps never, not the way I wanted to see him and have him see me. Strange, how the accurate thoughts I had at a very young age were often the most honest. Years later, I was always surprised when those honest thoughts returned, but I could have saved myself a lot of grief if I had acted on those thoughts. Perhaps, the truth is that I have never really needed a man in my life. But that night the feeling of loneliness was so strong, I couldn't go home.

Instead, I stopped at Anna's, hoping she would be home, and was disappointed when she was still out. The house was so dark. The stonework reminded me of a medieval fortress, the walls running with water and the stone pathway alongside the wall like a cobble-stoned stream. Water sloshed over the tops of my rubber boots and nearly ruined my shoes. My legs were splashed and cold. In the back, there was a night light at the top of the path where the long eaves reached out to cover the geraniums. They smelled pungent and spicy. Pots of flowers had been moved under the eaves for protection. I stood there listening to the rain on the roof and the occasional tinkle of the wind chimes caused by a cold updraft from the river. In the darkness it ran through my mind: menace, loss of control, danger; if the rain continued, I would not be able to contain myself. The river gave off a terrifying smell of upheaval. A trickling trout stream, sunny and delightful in the summer, when we padded around in bare feet and caught minnows, could cause us harm. Nathan wasn't coming back, Anna was out, and I was catching a chill standing there letting bitterness crawl up my spine, dark and roiling like the river, impatient and destructive. I walked home, never bothering to put up the umbrella, feeling young and helpless, withdrawn and needy. I needed to be able to dance, and pray, and rejoice in the rain of creation, but I felt capable of none of those things. Already, I felt that I was withered up inside.

Anna's Journal --

Thinking and prayer are not the same. In between those two activities come struggle and pain, a gratefulness for survival, and a never-ending yearning for the Divine.

I learned these differences from my friend Sylvia. She was truly grateful to be alive after the war. And she intended to live the rest of her life as a devotion of thanksgiving. She taught me the difference between wishful thinking and prayer--through her example. In prayer, she seemed to disappear into a vast receptacle of light. It protected her, and surrounded her, and kept her going long after the prayer had ended. It was a sustenance richer than food. I watched her transformation during the time we lived together. She was like a precious rose. Everything about her was a joy. Words like 'delight' and 'joy' come to mind in describing her, but I know how inadequate that is. Imagine a rose and compare it to the purity of her devotion. Consider the thorns and witness her struggle and pain as she reached inside, then outside, and again within. The torture of her search threatened to destroy her. She became pale and thin, until one day I noticed how still she sat on her prayer rug as though listening very carefully. But more than that, she was listening--to the exclusion of all else. I have never forgotten her stillness or the glow that she never lost afterwards. Perhaps, that is why she gave me her prayer rug when she left--so I would never forget.

Anna --

Anna returned to her house tired, hungry, and dirty. The flood water had polluted the streets and the drinking water. Typhoid shots were being given at Red Cross mobile centers, the homeless were queuing up at soup kitchens, and people she had never seen before were organizing relief shelters. One of the women she had never met thanked her in front of a volunteer group. From being the only woman out there helping, she had become just one of many until she felt it was better to come home and rest or she would be useless.

Before anything else, she wanted a bath. She built up the fire in the kitchen stove and scooped large buckets with rainwater from a wood barrel that had overflowed near the back porch. When the stove top was crowded with buckets, she filled a pan with leftover soup. Dripping water from the sides of the buckets hissed and sizzled on the hot stove, and the chill in the kitchen slowly disappeared.

It felt good to come home to a place that had been spared, to walls that seemed dry compared to what she had witnessed. The fire crackled and warmed her. She was bone tired as she dragged a tub from behind a curtain in the corner and put it directly in front of the stove. When the water was hot enough, she poured it into the tub and refilled the buckets to heat some more. This would be a luxurious soak.

Anna stood in the hot water, naked and goose-fleshy. She ladled out a bowl of hot soup, then sank into the tub, holding the bowl in her cold hands. She was going to make sure every inch was warm. It was a good thing no one could see her sitting in a hot tub of rain water, knees to chin, sipping potato soup, she thought. It seemed funny and she began to laugh tiredly, startling herself with the unusual and forgotten sound of laughter in her throat.

Laughter was a small capitulation, a small surrender, but surrender, nevertheless, to the absurd. For a short time it allowed her throat to give up its tension. "You're getting hysterical," she told herself and laughed again. When the soup was gone, she refilled her bowl. So much had happened in such a short time, and she was very tired.

Finding Paolo, seeing the destruction in town, as well as the many homeless and fearful, reminded her of the war. Better to laugh while she could because, soon, it would all turn to tears.

She wondered about Julia and how she was coping, watching all the children, while her mother took to bed and her father worked with the rescue teams. And Nathan, what a surprisingly strong young man he had turned out to be. There was so much help needed downtown. She had told him she would meet him again in six hours.

Julia --

I opened my eyes because there was someone far away calling to me. I tried to wake up.

"Julia, come in here!"

I heard the river calling and something else. The river battled its way through the ravine during the day and into my dreams at night. The noise shook the house. People said the river was subsiding, but the loud droning could not be blocked out. It demanded attention. No matter what I was doing, I could not forget that the river was out of control.

Normally, I slept so deeply that it was impossible to arouse me, but I heard Mom's voice. "Julia! Please."

I jumped out of bed, head reeling, and went to her room. She was lying on the freshly made bed in her bathrobe. But everything was wet--the carpet, the side of the bed, the towel she had used.

"Mom?"

"Julia, the baby is coming. Do you understand? Your dad isn't here. He left early to help downtown. You're the only one who can get help. I want you to go upstairs and tell Lilly what has happened. Hurry!"

I ran to my room for jeans and shoes then dashed out of the kitchen and up the outside stairs. As I knocked loudly, I caught a glimpse of Tommy ducking around the doorway to his bedroom. He put his head back around the corner and stuck out his tongue. Exasperated and frightened, I yelled for him to come back and tried to open the door. No one came. The door was locked.

I ran back downstairs and along the steep drive. It was still raining lightly and everything was muddy. The gravel drive seemed to be washed of most of its gravel. I slipped in the mud and landed on my hip, then pushed myself up quickly. My hands were scraped, and I began to cry as I thought of my mother waiting for me. It seemed pretty serious, but Paolo, I thought, would know what to do.

I slipped and slid down through the mud in his yard, all the while hearing the goats making pitiful noises in the barn. The place was a mess. The river sounded like a loud never-ending echo. Yesterday, Chris, and I, and the smaller ones watched from our comfortable living room as Paolo's chicken coop and all the chickens floated down the river. How we had laughed. It was like watching cartoons. But from where I stood today, everything was seen through a magnifying lens. The backyard was gone, eroded and torn away by the river; the dog house was gone; even the wood pile was gone. In its place was mud, debris, and devastation. The barn, that had once been partially undermined by the river, hung over the river's edge. The water came close to Paolo's back door, and I wondered how he had stayed there sleeping the last few nights.

The water sounds were frightening. The river rushed too closely to the side of the house, unrecognizable from the gentle stream I had known. Its unleashed power lashed at the back of the house and threatened to destroy, smash, terrify, and continue its rage until its demands were satisfied. Suddenly, I saw the magnitude of the flood and its consequences. I approached the house and called out tentatively. No one could possibly hear my voice.

"Paolo!" I stepped over the porch that looked uprooted and tossed at a crazy angle. It leaned against the side of the house.

"Paolo!" I screamed his name a second time, distraught and nearly hysterical as I thought of my errand. Impatiently, I climbed over the detached porch and stumbled against the door. The touch of my shoulder swung it open violently, banging it against the interior wall.

Paolo's mongrel dog sat in the center of the room whimpering. I looked around, distrubed by his pitiful whine. He was chewing on an old pair of shoes. I recognized them in a blur of dizziness, then acute consciousness: worn out and muddied work boots, cracked and turned up at the toes, worn in the heels. I was mesmerized by their useless pose, their lack of dignity. I wondered why Paolo was not there. Their dirty clown-like dejection was somehow sinister, and I started to cry until I heard my own fears chase me, sobbing and slipping up through the cold and treacherous yard.

My mother was waiting. And the baby! If I didn't hurry she might lose the baby. I scrambled away from the shack, doubled my efforts, and felt suddenly ashamed that I had resented a new brother or sister. Without knowing how it happened, I realized I might have loved the unborn person who had already been living for some time in our house. I had no time to think of Paolo. Perhaps, those were not the only boots he owned. I had to think of my new sister who would arrive all pink, and clean, and beautiful. I ran, gasping for air. Faster. Faster. There was only one place I could think of to go and that was Anna's house.

I ran there through the wet woods by a shortcut over the hill and through the Pines. It was windy up there that day, and I was soaking wet. But the moment I saw her house through the long arms of the evergreen trees, I knew she was not home. I climbed over the stone wall surrounding the back garden. It was tangled in Virginia Creeper. I twisted my ankle on a stone buried in perwinkle and crushed thyme, its scent so evocative of Anna. I banged on the back door, and stood staring at the pots of mint and basil growing in confusion under the eaves, the grass, dark and mossy and the stones, black from torrents of rain. A tiger lily stood in a corner, the only surviving flower in the garden. I thought of Mom, home alone, and I ran back toward the Pines in the direction I had come.

As I ran I had to hold branches back from hitting me in the face, but when I reached the magic circle of the Pines, I had to slow down to catch my breath. Even as I gasped for air and held to the stitch in my side, I could feel the reverent silence, so old, so quiet I could hear my own heart beat. The ground was piled with deep layers of pine needles, and the circle, surrounded by a broken down stone wall, was covered with laurel bushes. In some spots, pine creepers shot up through the needles and winter berries hung parasitically to them, red and white, smelling and tasting of peppermint. It was heady, standing in the stillness of the Pines. My sanity returned and with it, reality. I still had to find help.

The Dillons next door--though I had never been in their house, I knew that Jimmy Dillon worked the night shift as an orderly at the hospital. Most of the time his father worked out of town as a trucker. His mom had been gone for years. The house was secluded and unfriendly. No one was ever home. Once, I had gone there with candy bars to sell for our church. Jimmy bought one. He was fat, and I had known he would buy the candy. Otherwise, I would never have gotten near the place. But they had a telephone, and it wasn't on our party line. I prayed that theirs still worked.

Exhausted, I stumbled through the woods, cutting a path directly to their backyard from the Pines. Someone was home. I could hear an Elvis Presley tune, loud and irreverent, as I banged on the back door.

Jimmy opened the door and stood there scratching his bare stomach, while bacon grease spattered the wall behind the stove and permeated the house in wafts of smoke. I felt sick.

"My mom, Jimmy. You've got to do something. The baby is coming and it's not supposed to. Mom is in pain, and nobody is home. Is your phone still working?" I began to cry, feeling helpless and burdened.

"Where's your dad?"

"He's downtown helping."

"I'll phone the rescue team. They're supposed to be out all morning with the helicopter. They'll get in touch with him, too."

I stared at my fat neighbor. He looked like an adult all of a sudden. I forgot the fuzzy and grotesque dolls he had hanging on the rearview mirror of his car. I forgot the siren on his horn that sounded like a lewd whistle. He was sure enough of himself to help my mom, so I listened as he picked up the phone to put in the emergency call, and realized I must have been gone nearly half an hour.

"Come on, let's go see what your mother and the kids are up to."

Jimmy panted and wheezed as we ran down Meadow Road, then up the steep drive to my house. "You watch the kids and keep them out of the bedroom when we get in there."

I nodded, too frightened to speak.

Anna's Journal --

During the flood, I tried to keep my own balance. I wanted to disassociate the pure rain that fell from heaven from the polluted flood water. That way, thoughts that ran to excess in my mind, like paranoia, could be avoided. People were sure it was the end of all the good times. They imagined it to be an evil omen, and, perhaps, it was. Who can say what is in the heart of a city that creates guilt? But my intention was to cleanse myself and learn from the disaster. Finding Paolo had tipped me into deep, black, fathomless water for a while. I magnified what might have been and what never was, and thus lost my balance. I wanted to help him, to save him, but I came, eventually, to realize that there was nothing I could do. Life happens differently to each of us. There is something to be learned in this. None of us is powerful enough to assume that his efforts can change another's life. Each life must be lived alone. And now, I was alone--except for Julia--but that was not the same. I loved Paolo as I would have loved my other half. Without him there was a dangerous imbalance in me.

Julia --

I remember how awful it was to sit in my mother's bedroom as she lapsed into unconsciousness. Jimmy Dillon fussed around the bed, taking her pulse and worrying. At the hospital, he had never done much more than carry bedpans and transport people on stretchers. I know now that he understood nothing of the blood that flowed over the side of the bed, puddling on the floor beside a woman who was turning whiter each minute? He could see that the blood was coming from between her legs, but the baby wasn't doing anything yet, there was no reason for him to mess around. For that, I suppose, he was grateful because I was grateful, too. I was also scared.

After telling the kids to keep quiet, and out of the room, and to let him know when the helicopter got there, he sat down near the bed in a straight-backed chair and picked his nose nervously. I found Jimmy's irreverent presence embarrassing to watch and sat on the side of Mom's bed, holding her hand, and trying to pretend he was not there.

My mother looked worn out, as though she had taken stock of the adversities against which she had always braced herself. She writhed in pain, and I tried to help her to relax before the next, unpredictable contraction. I think they were unlike anything she had been through birthing the other children. Perhaps she realized that this child was not old enough to be born. I saw there and imagined gory and grotesque deformities--like the cyclops I had once seen in a jar of formaldehyde at a medical science fair. She had recently told me that she was ashamed to having another child at her age. I imagined how shameful she would feel if she had a deformed child to raise. However, I rationalized, there was no reason to suspect that there would be anything wrong with a child who insisted on being born in a flood during the eye of a hurricane.

I looked at her clenched and withdrawn body as the bedside clock ticked and nothing seemed to happen. At times, she seemed to relax. Could the pain have stopped, I wondered? In the stillness of the room I could hear Chris bossing the other kids around in the kitchen. I knew he was terrified and wanted to see what was happening. The stillness in the bedroom continued, and I began to wish something would happen. Anything was better than this ominous quiet.

"Dear God," I heard her whisper, "I've never been really thankful for anything, have I?"

I leaned closer.

"Julia? Are you there?"

I clutched her hand. "Yes Mom, I'm here."

She stared at the ceiling, instead of looking at me, and I couldn't tell if she recognized my voice. I heard her mumble something, so I clutched her hand tighter and got closer.

"It seems....It seems like there has always been pain. So much pain. I should be grateful....for eight healthy children. Each time they took a child from me there was pain. But what did I expect? It's such a strain....the disappointment. The only thing I have ever cared about was offending others, being accepted by them. I think the rain has stopped. Your father. Where is your father? He stopped singing, you know. Too many babies, too much responsibility. He's just a child himself you know. He stopped singing. Then I stopped singing. And now the children fight. So tired, Julia. I'm so tired. Julia? I wish Julia was here...."

"But Mom, I'm right here." I was crying now. "You've been talking to me the whole time...Mom?" I realized, then, that all this time she had not known me--still didn't know I was there.

"Julia, listen. Something has been missing in my life. What...." She blinked her eyes and looked directly at me for the first time.

"Julia, can you hear me. Listen...I've been so greedy, demanding, and full of self-pity. Life should be filled with happiness."

"My God," she demanded weakly, "what are we all searching for that keeps us from enjoying what we have? Don't cry, Julia...."

"Please Mom, don't be talking this way. It isn't your fault."

"Whose fault is it then. Don't you see? I've been so lonely. Eight children and a husband who has done his best, and still I was dissatisfied. I no longer wish to blame someone else for my unhappiness. I wish...I wish...."

I saw her eyes close slowly. She was first too weary to talk and then semi-conscious again.

There was a timid knock on the door.

"I said for you kids to stay out of here!" Jimmy shouted.

I sat in silence a while longer, watching my mother, unable to assimilate what she had told me. I felt blank and curiously empty. It was all suddenly unreal. It was necessary to ward off thoughts of death, I thought, to refuse to acknowledge them.

"Jimmy," I whispered, "I have something important to tell you."

"Can't be so important it won't wait."

"But it is. Honest. It's terrible!"

Impatiently, he leaned closer to me, so Mom wouldn't hear us.

"Is the baby coming?" I asked.

"No. It's going to wait for the helicopter!"

I stood looking at his face for evidence that he was telling the truth. "Will my mother be OK?" I asked just above a whisper.

"Yes, she will. Now stop worrying. What was so important that you wanted to tell me. You shouldn't upset yourself when you don't understand the first thing that's going on. Well?"

I stared at him, grief twisting my face.

"I wanted to tell you something is wrong at Paolo's. I went down there before I went to your house and he was gone. Everything was a mess."

"I know."

"You know?"

"Paolo is dead. The rescue team found him this morning. He died on his way to the hospital."

It was too much for me and I started to cry for the second time that day.

"Never mind kid. Hush. Never mind. You have a lot on your mind right now."

I sat there bewildered and wished I knew what I could be doing. This whole problem was beyond my experience and judgment. But just then I heard the helicopter as Chris came running into the room. Excitement possessed his compact energetic body until he was nearly beside himself.

"Are they taking my Mom in a helicopter? I want to go with her." He burst into tears.

"Listen, I want you kids to be good. You're all staying here until your dad comes home. What would happen if he knew you left?"

Chris continued to cry. I stared at the dripping blood by my mother's bed in gathering awareness. I could smell it. I had never seen so much blood before, so much that the sickly sweet smell of it was warm in my nostrils. The blood was still alive, but my mother didn't look as if she was.

Just then, Dad rushed into the bedroom, followed by a medic carrying a portable stretcher.

"Julia, get the kids out of here," he said quietly.

I hurried them out to the kitchen, while Jimmy ran outside to the helicopter to talk to the pilot.

Soon after the helicopter lifted out of the back yard, Anna arrived and offered to take over. I was tired and irritable and very glad to see her.

"Oh, Anna, it's so good to have you here," I hugged her tightly.

"So, you're going to have another brother or sister, are you?"

"I hope so, Anna. Mom looked like she was going to die." I knew I looked frightened because my fear was reflected for a moment in her eyes.

"Why do you say that, child?"

"Because there was blood everywhere. She was talking strangely and she didn't recognize me." I led her to Mom's room. The bedspread had not been removed. It lay there as testimony. On it was imprinted the reddish-brown stain of my mother's body.

"And Anna...Paolo...is dead."

Anna --

Paolo was gone. The crazy old man, the crazy old fool was gone. Didn't he know he could have stayed in her home? How much room did he need? Did he not know that material success and public fame meant nothing to her? Didn't he know she would have cooked chicken soup and let the goats roam through the house, the cat, and dog and pig, too, if he needed them around? Didn't he understand that she was different? What mattered to others was no longer her concern because she was alone and knew what it was like to live life each day and hour locked in silence. She wouldn't have been in his way. She took up very little space. Already, her flesh and bones seemed gone, and there remained simply a mind and heart that glowed as though nearly extinguished. She had discovered that there were no bodies of darkness, only bodies without light. Even that wasn't real, but she had almost disappeared before she caught on.

Anna had nearly disappeared, and it did not matter at all! All that remained of this knowledge was an urgency, ill-defined and frightening, like the darkness that had become so complete that truth was inescapable. And there seemed to be no way out of it. And now, trapped and seated on the basement steps of Julia's home, all she wanted to do was sink through the concrete, to be as a layer of dust, and to leave behind all the pain. The knowledge that one of Lilly's children had deliberately dropped the latch on the outside of the basement door, when she had come down to inspect the flood damage, was more than she could accept right now.

She wanted to forget that she was alone in the world. She stood in the dark and thought of Paolo. In one way, he had been courageous. Rather than surrender to the feelings of gritty dust and a scattered-particle-non-existence, he had exploded in wilful despair. He had not considered that he was welcome to seek her after the many times she had gone to him. Did he understand, when he had tried to rescue his statues from the storage room at Darman's boarding house, that he _might_ die? Perhaps his will to live had been greater than her present urge to lie on the cold cement.

She remembered the sculpture he had done of her--skull of stone, immortalized hollow cheekbones, staring eyes, the eye sockets always pointed in the same direction, the focus so intense. That was how he had seen her for one moment in time. She thought he had seen her soul. Yet, when he had finished and had studied it for some time, he told her that his own vision made him uncomfortable. With that realization, he had rolled the head down to the river and pushed it into the deepest pool. She understood that he had captured her soul and could not accept responsibility for his creation.

The crazy old man. She wanted merely to touch, and love, and allow him to touch back, to establish where the beginnings and ends met. She had wished for him to want the same. All that soup had been a gesture of love, ordinary and warm. Soup filled the body, and it acknowledged a finite shape to life. There were too many skulls in the basement and in the river, too many horrid memories of darkness. Paolo had been more than a lover. He had been the old man in her: wounded, and tired, and ready to give up. He had been old far beyond his years, beyond the crumbling mountains of his youth. Part of the stone had chipped in the wrong place, that part of the stone that would not yield.

The task he had set for himself was beyond him. He had been a man who was already beaten, yet overly proud, who would not acknowledge his own vulnerability. She had wanted him to love her, and if he had loved her, he would not have left. He would have stayed to help, to create more than stones. He would have heard the heartbeat of stone, and he would not have left her behind.

It was then, from the darkness, down the concrete stairs in the flooded dirt-floor basement, that she heard a whimper. Echo after echo of it skimmed across the water of the flooded rooms. Anna waded through the black, mud-bottom rooms, the cold water reaching half way up her thighs as she searched, past the potato bin with its bloated rotten potatoes, past mason jars and rusty tool boxes, past spider webs that hung freely in the canning room near the ruined furnace. She wandered, in terror, as she listened to the sobs of her own pain. "Mother, help me," she cried. The days of the flood had taken their toll and she was unable to escape the depths of her sorrow.

She remembered when she first met Paolo. He had held out his hand and she had taken it. "Hold on tightly. Don't let go." Did he say that? Every cell of her hand wanted to tear free and scream at the human touch. For years afterward, when she still did not know him well, she watched his hands and remembered the power of his will. He refused to listen to her despair. He became the beacon of hope that stabbed at the palm of her hands and painfully pulled her back to life.

Where are you, Anna? Where is the child that you were before you were tested and locked in this hell of despair? Such a short time ago you were young and made of unformed passions. She heard the whimper, again, reached out, and touched the carpenter's table in the furnace room. The noise was getting louder. Pulling herself forward she stepped up on the table, out of the water. Her head brushed against the cobwebs along the dusty beams as she pressed her ear to the ceiling.

"Child? Are you there? Where are you?"

"Anna, is that you?"

"I'm trapped in the basement. Is that you, Julia? Is that really you?"

"I'm coming right down. I'll be right there."

Anna waited.

It was a long wait. Eternity. The damp air was clinging to her bare arms and scalp. Even her bones felt exposed. The damp was an overwhelming smell that tasted of the underground and moldy burrowing animals. It smelled of spiders. It left her bewildered and numb. Had the whimper come from Julia or Tommy who had stuck his tongue out at her through the grimy basement door window after he had locked her in the cellar? Was someone coming to open the door? Would anyone unlock the door and let in light and air to breathe?

She retraced her steps through the claustrophobic cubicles, touching the wood framed doorways, trying to remember the direction to the steps. Then she heard scraping and struggling to open the heavy storm doors at the top of the cellar entrance. Again, she heard the whimpering, so full of grief and yearning that she held her breath to listen. It stopped, abruptly. As the light rushed in through the opened door, she backed away and huddled on the cold stairs.

"Anna, don't cry anymore. We've been looking for you all afternoon. Please, Anna, don't cry." So that was it, the sound of her own misery.

Julia pulled and pulled until Anna sat weakly on the top step in the door frame. "You're all wet, and the basement smells horrible. You'd better come in the house or you'll be sick."

The rain was a fine spray as she raised her face to its healing touch.

Anna's Journal --

During the war I draped my windows in black. I wanted to emphasize my sorrow. Instead, the windows framed in black curtains gave me a changed perspective on life. Death, for instance, I saw as quite theatrical. So often, the main characters exit center stage, never to return, living only in the mind of the audience.

The stillness after the flood was magnified when I sat by the open window. I saw the world, suddenly magnified with binocular intensity. I thought of Paolo. Then I thought of Julia's mother, her unborn child, and her unfilled dreams. I wondered at my terror the day Lilly's child, Tommy, locked me in the basement. Then, by the light that slanted through my window, I noticed that the crystal I had hung was refracting bits of rainbow light and scattering color throughout the room. My thoughts wandered to the day when Nathan stopped by to give me a copy of a photo he had taken of Julia. She sat on a rock in the middle of the river looking vulnerable. I was surprised that Nathan recognized those qualities in her and knew, then, that he loved her in the same way that Paolo had loved me. Her reflection on the quiet river was superimposed on the reflected trees near the water's edge. It made me think of the tangled woods and straight stately pines in my back yard. A lot depends on how trees are planted and in what soil. There were so many angles from which I could stand at the window to have different views of the trees. It seems that we grow and die from certain angles. Most often those angles are *refracted by experience and someone else's point of view. So often I forgot that fact, forgot to tell Julia that I loved her.*

Anna --

It was late and dark when Anna got home from Julia's house the day she was trapped in the basement. The rain had stopped. She was so tired her legs trembled and her muscles were hot and sore. High in a sky that had reappeared when the rain ended, the stars shone. There was the Milky Way, blurred, and moving as she watched. There, to her left, was a crown of twelve stars shining gloriously. She breathed deeply and began to hum: 'Ave, Ave, Ave Maria'. It was a welcome to see the stars again. In the morning she would return to Julia's to help out, to stay as long as they needed her. Late last night, Stephan heard that Adele had died, given up, they said. The baby was dead, stillborn. The children, except for Julia, had not been told, but Stephan had been overwhelmed with his burdens, and she had offered to help.

At least there were no more eyes. She was sure of it. The eyes--if only she could have reached them. She thought of Paolo and how positive she had been that the eyes were his. Now he was gone. He had had the eyes of an artist: truth seeking, probing, relentlessly staring eyes. As filled with sorrow as she felt right now, she was too tired to cry. All her sorrow had been left in Julia's dark ugly basement. The grief and horror of Paolo's death, the vast darkness he had stepped into, the end with its finality and separation: the accumulation of these hurts had split her apart.

Anna no longer wished to live alone. She walked up the stone path alongside the house, touching the stone water pots. They were like ancient vessels decorating the wall. Paolo had made them, but she had saved them from ending in the river like most of his creations. Next summer, she intended to plant flowers in them as a gesture of love.

The house was terribly damp when she arrived, but she was in bed in minutes and intended to stay there until awakened by the sun. Surely there would be sun in the morning.

But in the middle of the moonless night she awoke, heart pounding and disoriented. She had awakened from a dreamless, peaceful sleep to feel that she was being watched. As she lay there, she kept her eyes closed, afraid of the piercing eyes for the first time. When she thought she knew whose they were, they didn't seem terrifying or harmful. In the past, she had been sure that they intended nothing harmful. Now, she was no longer certain. Her heart pounded. To whom could she cry for help? She twisted in bed and pretended to be asleep. The eyes watched through the dreary lightless window, nearly obscured by the pine bough. Her terror grew boundless until she was covered in beads of perspiration. She waited, chilled and fearful, until finally, in the long uneventful wait, she fell back to sleep.

The next morning she arose late, feeling heavy with fatigue. She went to the kitchen to start the fire, opened the window beneath the wide protective eaves, and saw that the flowers there in the sheltered boxes needed to be watered. Ironic, how life went on and the plants still needed water. She stepped outside to one of the water-filled stone bowls on the wall and scooped out water to care for the flowers. The morning mist had disappeared from the back garden and the small forest glen. The garden was ruined, but she looked forward to cleaning it and getting ready for next season. She began to think of the bulbs she wanted to plant and decided that next year the garden would look quite different.

The sky was clear. As she looked up further, toward the Pines, she saw a rainbow arched over the tall trees in a bridge between heaven and earth. It was a hazy green, and blue, gold, and pale yellow. It was fading quickly, but she was glad she had not missed it. It made her think of a warrior's bow, arched in the sky like a lyrical music passage. It was still too wet to sit outside, but she could stand near the open window. Somehow, a small phenomenon like a rainbow could start the day with such pleasure and hope. Inside the house, she put water on the stove and, once again, knelt in prayer. Years later, Anna referred to the flood as a miracle. She said that for the first time she understood the rain. She had listened before, but she had never understood the word 'creation'.

When Julia arrived at Anna's house that morning, she heard Anna's voice as she walked up the path. 'Ave Maria,' she sang, over and over. It wasn't the words so much as Anna's voice that haunted Julia. For the first time, it made her feel guilty to stand outside, so she knocked loudly at the back door. She felt that she might be intruding on something private, but the moment she saw Anna's face, she knew Anna didn't mind. Before Julia knew it, they were sitting down to breakfast, and the prospect of going back home to help out did not seem so tiresome.

"Did you notice the rainbow in the sky toward the Pines?" Anna asked.

"I must have missed it," Julia answered.

"That's odd, Julia. You must walk with your head up higher. Did you sleep well last night, my dear?"

Julia felt suddenly uncomfortable. Anna had never spoken to her in a voice edged with criticism or suspicion before now. Then she smiled. "Never mind, Julia, it doesn't matter."

Julia had brought her camera along to take pictures of the river from the road at the top of the ravine. The river still sounded loud ~~and~~ wild. She took a photo of Anna that day as they walked back to Julia's house. Anna was prepared for the posed snapshot, so her eyes were shuttered and protected, but Julia liked to look at that photo which she kept for years afterward in her wallet. Without that photo, she could barely remember what Anna looked like.

PART II

LOOKING INWARDS

Julia --

I park the rental car in the reservoir parking lot next to the petunia beds and the welcome marigolds. The flower beds are impressive to the last detail. There is a plaque that says 'CONSERVE AND USE OUR WATER WISELY'. The plaque is nearly obscured by a stand of willows--after all these years. Willows join branches with other willows in an entwined embrace around a manicured lawn. Several peacefully-placed green wrought-iron benches decorate the miniature park. The place feels like an abandoned religious grotto. The setting is idyllic, but empty. No one else stands here to admire the serenity and beauty. The spot, where Paolo once came each day for spring water, is preserved in a stone alcove, and one of his statues stands nearby. The water now comes through a stone trough and falls on stone terraces, where blue hydrangeas grow beside the protected spring.

It is a pleasure to be out of the car, to walk on the soft grass, and smell the smells of spring. A pair of robins alight on the lawn. Sleek and fat, they hop closer to where I stand. Their beaks are a colorful orange, their heads cock from side to side. I am reminded of the sharp edges of spring when I counted robins on lawns, walked to school very slowly each morning, and absorbed the new and changed outlines of the trees. Buds fill the air until there is no space between them any more. I am enchanted by the smell and sight of new green life, the fresh air that circles each bud, and each new blade of grass that encircles me with its heady fragrance.

I wonder who is responsible for this secluded park. 'A State of Connecticut Project', reads the impersonal sign at the head of the drive. To soften the impact of government control, a landscaper has designed this miniature park. It is a nice touch that Paolo's spring has inadvertently been preserved, that flowers have been planted. I gaze at the pale green weeping willows in this perfect location. The trees satisfy my eyes. They have grown quickly to maturity. In my mind's eye, I can still see the old dairy fields under water, the dilapidated barns, and unpruned apple orchards. I see the broken down fencing of Decker's farm, the sawmill where Mrs. Rathbone once gave out cider at Halloween, and the old horses that once came to the fences to scratch their sides.

I like this sheltered reservoir that conjures up memories, even though those memories involve a painful turning point in my life. It is a point that I associate with the flood, a time when I was bewildered and drowning. The memory is like an umbrella under which I protected myself for many years. By the time I graduated from high school, the dam was nearly constructed. There were lots of parties that summer and everyone became sentimental. Inscriptions in the classbook were meant to cement friendships. With hindsight, I realize we had good reason to cry and be upset though we did not understand those reasons. That summer would signal the end of personal growth for many, the end of idealism, and the end of the belief that change was possible. For some, it would be the beginning of the forging of personality. For others, it would be the beginning of hardening of arteries to the heart. We came oftentimes after the late night parties and the quick kisses in the back seats of borrowed cars, to the dam site to paint our names on the boulders that were being piled beneath its foundations. We wanted, in some small way, to make time stop. We wanted to immortalize our private jokes and tears of separation. Nathan and I were like all the others.

One night there was a party at the Hogan's place. I invited Nathan because he was home from art school. He was about to spend his second year of school in Boston, so I felt very grown-up and lucky to have him by my side. However, he spent most of the party out back drinking with the rowdies until it got to be late and Mr. and Mrs. Hogan began flicking the lights on and off. Then he danced with me once, but he had had too much to drink. I thought of my father's drinking problem and suddenly became frightened.

Before that night was over, we drove out to the dam site and Nathan painted a stylized,billboard heart with our names linked on one of the large boulders. Then we made vows to return one day, but never did.

For years afterward, we met occasionally for lunch. I knew that an artist's life was not an easy one. Nathan lived in a world of cruel honesty. New York, where he had moved after art school, was not a place for the timid or tentative. "Imagine living back in the woods," Nathan once commented. We were discussing our home town. "The place is a quagmire." And yet, his art world was a constant hell of awareness that shocked and dismayed me. Nothing was sacred. Perversion, contempt for traditional experiences, addiction, and competition were the strangleholds of his world. But it was Nathan's world, and he gloried in it. He ran toward the unknown like an intrepid spirit. He understood the darkness within himself, and there was no one like him. No one. Yet by the time I became aware of him--in a fearless way--there was no place in his life for me.

In the last few years, I have slowed down and stopped running. Knowing that darkness is forever there, I see my own history and Nathan's against the fathomless abyss of the past. If I had seen the flood's intrusion in my life as cleansing, my life might have been different.

I am like this reservoir. Beneath my surface is the old farm, the pot-holed road, and the broken down fences. The winding river goes nowhere until it breaks loose, destroys, and kills because it is angry with its aimless existence. Sometimes I am as still as water, deep and clear. I sit near windows beside a spring that is constant and pure. The spring reaches down to water collected in caves and caverns deep underground, and I see the pieces of my life as an unfinished mosaic. "Why do you need the pieces?" I can hear Anna ask. "Too much introspection--looking inward and backward--is a death wish. You wish to see farther than history." Anna was able to see through my stormy emotions. All my awkward learning and mistakes were patiently overlooked as she waited for me to grow. But I am still impatient, regretful of time I consider wasted and unfocused, wanting what, I do not understand. I know I can no longer copy Anna and expect that life will unfold before my eyes. I know it is impatience that creates fear, fear that I may take a dead end, have to back up, begin again, lose time, remain unfocused.

I look back down Meadow Road at the magnificent dam and the water that fills the valley. Meadow Road is a dead end. It ends at the spring, now. The meadows that once gave the road its name are buried under tons of water. The reservoir is a blue background; the waves are moving paint strokes that compete with my own reflection.

I get back in the car. I want to drive through the Pines. Chris wrote a few years ago to say that the whole hillside had been torn up to build a private condominium estate. I drive to the corner of Meadow Road and take a left past a modernized laundromat, unrecognizable from the run-down place where Nathan and I had once quarreled. The turnoff is just beyond it. The drive says 'No Thru Traffic', but I take it anyway. The road winds peacefully up the hill with its elegant white fencing along both sides. I see horses pastured in the small glens among the trees. A clever developer has seen all the possibilities. At the top of the road the fence is broken by an open gate. I drive on through it. It is hard to believe a place can be so changed.

The tall pines are gone. Condominiums of a dull gray color sit at the top of the hill in the old laurel circle. Where I had once found arrowheads, there is a communal playground. I suspect, that where Anna and I had once placed our sleeping bags to gaze at the stars, I might find someone's flower bed. I roll down my window, and I wonder exactly what kind of dreams became important to me when I once watched the stars from here. Surely I must have had some sense of ancient spirit lore. I could no longer feel the spirits of Indians or pilgrims. Once, this place had been so important to me. The circle, that was once the Pines, had been broken.

Anna used to tell me I made her happy. She rejoiced in our friendship. I believed her, then. I wonder if she missed me or thought of me in her new life as a nun. The circle is gone. It has been bulldozed and sophisticated beyond recognition. I cannot pinpoint a spot between any of the private driveways and say, "This was the Pines." I cannot feel it, either.

After a while, I start the car and drive down

Meadow Road. I am afraid to look up toward Anna's old house, afraid of what I might see. Somewhere along the way, I have become an emotional coward. I expect the place to be shabby and uncared for and it does look that way.

My guilt and fear spring from my neglect. Thirty years is a long time. I have been around the world in thirty years, but never once have I come back here. I think I am unrecognizable, blurred, and faded from the snapshots that Nathan once took. I have come to expect many things to be that way. The house is run-down, yet, it is, after all, made of stone and durable. The flowers are overgrown. The flower boxes are gone. The stone wall along the side path needs work as do the windows that once stayed open to welcome me. The house needs a lot of work. The windows, especially, need to be replaced. The inside still looks as though it must be damp and dreary. I used to wonder how Anna could bear to live there alone. But I can still see the lovely lace curtains and Anna's face at the window, waiting for me.

Strange, that Anna settled in this small New England town, she, and so many other European pilgrims who considered it a haven. My Polish family, the other Poles I knew, the Italians, and Irish, and Lebanese, all the people I know who work so hard and stay so poor living here, settled in this exquisitely beautiful countryside. These families are a silent unacknowledged majority who do not fit the image of New England. And yet, whoever immigrates here develops a regional pride to hide the unease and disappointment they feel, knowing what New England could be, but isn't. The disappointment turns to a stubbornness that goes one step beyond pride--to survival. That is the atmosphere Anna walked into when she bought this house and stayed in town, in this place where she stopped running and decided that she would make a new life for herself. If I were a stranger, looking for a new home, I wonder if I would have stopped here. I look up at the house as it stands in silent mockery.

Anna once said that if I didn't work with the talents I had, they would be given to someone else. That was the day Anna gave me her house.

"But what will you do?" I asked.

"I am going away, Julia."

I didn't believe her, but I accepted her gift and left town. And now I want to know if this is all there is--an old broken down house that paid for my education and a few memories of a woman who could have been my mother, but wasn't?

I have spent my life running from the memory of the wrecked woman who was my real mother. She was never able to stand still to reflect on what she had. She had gone on collecting experience in a meaningless rush until it overwhelmed and burdened her. When I went through her possessions, I found a gold locket.

She had never bothered to put anything in it, and that is one of my strongest memories of her.

I have tried so hard for so many years to be like Anna, but I don't know why. What was it about her that made me want to imitate her? None of this is easy for me to understand.

That first year away, I came home from college at Christmas, using money I could not afford to spend, just to see her. I guess I wanted to thank her for the house or at least share my excitement with her. I also needed to rent the house, so I would have a steady income. I wanted her to know how happy I was to be out in the world, learning, and being with people who seemed alive and different. I wanted to thank her for making my escape possible. But she was gone. No one seemed to know where she had gone. I asked Mrs. Adams who used to be Anna's next-door neighbor.

"Probably gone crazy. That woman never was like you and me," she answered. "Where you going to school, Julia?"

"Connecticut College for Women."

"Oh...that's a fancy women's college, isn't it? Must have gotten a good scholarship."

I nodded. It was partially true, but I wasn't about to tell her that the rest of the money came from renters in Anna's house, which was now my house. I was shocked and angry when she continued to gossip about Anna, so I left with no more questions.

The next year, I got my first letter from Anna. But when I found out that she had entered a monastery, I was dismayed. How could she have done it, I asked myself over and over? It made no sense to me. As the years went by, my attitude changed from resentment to deep sorrow. Because she was cloistered, she was cut off from me. I came to understand that nothing would ever be the same again. In my sorrow I could not see all the years she had given me friendship. I could not be grateful for the house which was a reminder of my loss.

Once, years ago, when my daughter, who was Nathan's child, was born, I almost came home. I thought seriously of living in the house Anna had given me. But the more I thought of being alone, without her, the less I could bring myself to do it. Besides, I was ashamed to be without a husband.

Most of those feelings are gone, now. Anna used to say she was grateful for my friendship. She said it with such sincerity, such a humble grateful demeanor that I believed I was very important to her. The standards she set in our friendship spoiled me. Her humility and gentleness, I have learned, are rare and precious qualities.

I decide it is time to leave Meadow Road and drive to the monastery before it gets dark. There, I have booked a room in one of the guest houses. There are two guest houses, now. St. Gregory's, which would have been my first choice, the larger of the two, is only for men. St. Bridget's is for women. Strange, that a monastery of cloistered women would attract so many men who seek a retreat.

During the Lenten season, I am told, both houses are crowded and reservations necessary. With religious revivals mushrooming out of midair, monasteries are trendy places to visit lately, and this one is no exception. Tonight, I will sleep at St. Bridget's and retrace more steps down into the past.

It is already dusk as I drive along back country roads. I wonder if I will remember my way. It has been years since my only visit to Regina Laudis Monastery. That was the time when Anna convinced me to take her there. With my new license and a borrowed car, I was tired and nervous when we arrived. I remember very little except that I felt awkward. Though I was Catholic, the Mass, that started just as we arrived, seemed never-ending. I was unaccustomed to hearing voices singing acappella and did not like it. I waited on edge for human errors: a scratchy voice, a forgotten stanza, a falter, a discord. But none of that occurred, and just as I was getting used to the melodic rise and fall of monotonous phrases, the Mass ended. Anna darted into a small room, an empty waiting area, and spoke in hushed tones to a nun who sat behind an ornate metal gate framed in velvet curtains. It looked like a confessional. Her conversation, serious and heavy like the mute velvet drapes, was intense. I tried to make myself small in the quiet room to avoid overhearing anything I might wish I had never heard.

As I drive along I am disquieted that my memory of the roadside is so dim. I am tempted to go through Litchfield or Caanan to browse through the quaint little shops and expensive boutiques that I could not afford thirty years ago, the ones that still sell Jean Meyer clothes and Weejun loafers. It might be fun/to stop and buy anything I wish: an expensive suit, a silk blouse, a jaquard tie or sweater. But there is little satisfaction in it anymore. I have had money for quite a few years and realize it isn't important to me. Certainly, it has not brought happiness. Mind you, it did bring a certain satisfaction and complacency in the beginning, but never happiness.

I recall those first years of school and the struggle. Medical school was a long expensive proposition. There were loans, and more loans, and a child to take care of. Eventually, I had to sell Anna's house. It wasn't easy, but it wasn't an unhappy time in my life. I was too busy to be unhappy. And my daughter was always there, that cheery non-judgmental face at the end of each day. We laughed, and played games, or read quietly, and ate dinner together. It was an uplift to any day. When she went to bed, I went back to my studies until far into the night. It continued like that for many years. Gradually, I started earning money, then more money. The bills were paid off, and we moved to a nicer place.

My daughter never liked the new place. It was too big, she said. Her little voice was like the nagging of my own conscience. "We can't talk to each other from one room to the next without shouting, Mom. We were closer in the crowded place." Familiar possessions were gotten rid of one after another: the old sofa, the ripped chair, the cheap bed in my room, the worn desk in the study. I bought new furniture:

an elegant sofa that did not allow for snacks, the new wingback chair that gave me a crick in the neck as I fell asleep by the new fireplace. It was quite lovely. However, the new bed was too large and firm. It made me feel lonely. I didn't sink into it. It was flat, and wide, and too big for one person. And so it went. By then, my daughter was a teenager and growing away from me. I should have been better prepared for that superior look she gave me from time to time. She assessed me silently and rejected my ways. Even though I read all the books on dealing with teenagers, I could not accept that faraway look in her eyes. The bright cheery-faced expressions came seldom and I saw less and less of her in the evenings. She preferred to go to the library to study or bring friends home to visit. The friends were uncomfortable with my presence, so I disappeared into my study more often than not.

These last two years, she has been away at college. I am grateful that I can afford a special education for her, that she doesn't have to struggle the way I did for space, and time, and the means to study. I have more than enough for the two of us. But I am terribly lonely.

Who do I know in Boston? Why do I live there? I did not have time to stop along the way to make friends. My daughter was my friend. I had my work, too much of a good thing, I think. I found myself making excuses to stay at the hospital or the clinic eighteen hours a day. People shook their heads. How could I have a personal life?

And men? No men. The only man who ever meant anything to me was Nathan. But he was busy being famous. He has his opinions on everything nowadays, tells people what he does not like and exactly what he thinks of them. He has narrowed his focus of interest over the years. I tell him it's a sign of aging. He tells me it is the single-minded approach to his art that has made him great, and I should mind my own business. I should.

I decide not to detour to Litchfield to browse, or sightsee, or act in any way like a tourist. I have no real business there. It would be another way of putting off the inevitable. Instead, I stop for gas at a little place off the Litchfield green to ask about a decent place to eat. I have not had anything since breakfast, and I feel a headache coming on. There, I am directed next door to a restaurant overlooking the green. It is a tourist attraction, but it is clean and the food is good. I order ale, and fried clams, and enjoy the typical New England meal. I sit there and wonder why I so seldom appreciate experiences while they occur, why moments in the present elude me.

As a doctor it has been easy to travel. I took my daughter with me wherever I went, and tutored her, or hired tutors. It was good for the two of us. However, each time we returned I was glad to be home. I kept the apartment unoccupied, so we could always come home and settle down quickly. To sit in familiar chairs, sleep in our own beds, read the "Times" on Sunday morning, walk down Chestnut Avenue to St. Mary's, and visit with our Jesuit friends. That was my welcome home. But now that I have traveled so much, I think I'd like to tour New England.

I could sit in the historical societies and read about the past. People from the past come alive for me as people in the present never do. When they are dead, their lives are revealed. They no longer need to hide and conceal their lives. I would like to turn to those who lived here two hundred years ago. I feel close to them. It is my feeling that life, while it is being lived, is a shell. There isn't enough time for reflection and gratitude, not enough time to appreciate what we are given until it is gone, or in the past, or taken away. There is a hazy rushing quality to my life.

It is hard to think of Anna as belonging to the past. Even though she has been inaccessible to me all these years, there was always the knowledge that she was the one truly alive person in my world. Now, she is gone, dead--merely a mosaic piece of the past.

I kept all those letters she sent--one each year. In the first one, she explained that she had taken the vows of a cloistered nun, that she would be allowed to send me just one letter each year, but that I was allowed to write as often as I wished. I cried my heart out and wrote to her night after night. I grieved and did not understand. It was like crying to the moon. No answers came back to me. There was no dialogue. By the time Anna answered me, I had solved my own problems and felt ashamed of my complaints and self-pity. There I was, with all her worldly possessions, but she was unavailable to me. For years I questioned her reasons for self-imprisonment. Why was she hidden from the world, punished by isolation?

I thought of Paolo and imagined a tragic unrequited love between him and Anna. I experienced guilt in not acknowledging our friendship more openly, blamed myself for Anna's loneliness, and thought of the hard life she had, the thankless work, the eccentric image that no one understood. I find it ironic that I am nearly the same age Anna was when she entered the monastery. My daughter is the same age I was when Anna disappeared from my life.

Anna never did cling or hang on to me. My daughter will probably never know how wrenching it has been for me to part with her, either. I never did cling, or ask her to keep in touch, or stay close by. I never wanted to interfere with her growth. I paid for her education and sent her on her way. Essentially, that is what Anna did for me. With her hard work and austere life, she gave me everything--even the letters.

They came at intervals when I needed advice or encouragement. Never was there recrimination or criticism. When I pursued Nathan with a narrow-minded blindness, Anna did not say, "Watch out Julia. You'll get yourself into trouble." When my daughter was born and I wasn't married, she wrote to tell me of my blessings. There were no disparaging remarks about my marital state, about ruining my life, or being saddled with the results of my sins. She did not chastise Nathan when he couldn't find room in his life beyond his art. She made my daughter welcome. She celebrated and rejoiced for me. I took her support and strength and hoarded it in my heart.

Anna, what will I do with the rest of my life? I am forty-seven and feel old. I have had my work, my daughter, a man who didn't want me, a mother who wasn't my spiritual mother, and a best friend who is dead. I feel like my grandmother, who used to go through her trunks each week to count the holy cards that she collected at funerals and wakes. She would touch each card lovingly and read the inscription on the back, then count the cards and file them away in alphabetical order until the next week.

Or maybe I could be like Lottie, the old lady I took care of at the Baptist nursing home. Her room was filled from top to bottom with dated shoe boxes. Her intention, now that she had stopped living her life actively, was to recall each moment backward in time.

She had started with the most recent shoe box and was going through them one by one. She had decided she would die when she reached the last box. But she was eighty, Anna, and I am still so young.

I cannot sit in the restaurant any longer. The center green is empty except for the Revoluntionary War cannon and the tarnished silver plaque of Lyman Beecher and his illustrious daughter. The white Congregational Church is time-lighted and its elegant steeple becomes gently illuminated against the darkening sky.

At the monastery, which has been elevated to the status of an abbey, a tour bus fills with pilgrims who have visited for the afternoon. They have attended Mass and are buying souvenirs in the gift shop before getting back on the bus. Old ladies fuss over their large purses, whisper loudly, and forget they are no longer in the chapel. Many of them have strained looks on their faces, as though an entire afternoon of silence is more than they can handle. Some of them wear pious expressions. Nearly everyone carries a missal and cane for support as they take hold of each other's arms.

I park near the women's guest house and carry my overnight bag inside. It is quiet. There, I find a note on the foyer table telling me which room is mine in this lovely old home. Anna once wrote to tell me that a neighbor had willed the house to the abbey. It is a typical New England saltbox home with high ceilings, six small bedrooms upstairs, and one small bathroom with minimal conveniences: a claw-legged tub, a toilet, and a small rust-stained sink. The rooms are scrubbed and polished clean. Each room has a single bed with chenile bedspread, matching curtains, bedside lamp, Bible, small closet, chest of drawers, and a metal crucifix over the bed. There is nothing else.

The floors are scrubbed polished oak, carpetless, and cold. I imagine that all this is luxury compared to the small cell which must have been Anna's for more than thirty years.

Once unpacked, I decide to get into a nightgown and read for a short time in bed. It has been a tiring day. I fall asleep over a paperback best seller, and am surprised when I hear a knock on my door some time later. A short nun, ageless and wizened, stands in the doorway. She looks like she has more energy than I do when I wake each morning. "Are you all right?" she asks, looking at my nightgown and tired expression. When I say I tire easily from travelling, she nods her head in sympathy. She asks if I care to be awakened for matins. I remember Anna's description of that special ceremony and am suddenly curious to know as much as I can about this place.

"Yes," I answer, "Please wake me."

That night, my sleep is filled with dreams. There are red dolphins and storms at sea. I am captain of a boat, and the crew is Anna and my daughter. My own mother, whom I have tried not to think about for years, is a passenger. A school of dolphins comes swimming by with grins on their faces. One of them has a wise look like the short nun. As I take the night watch, I am invited to join the dolphins for a swim. They assure me that the boat will continue to sail without me, that I will not be missed. Yet once I am submerged in water, what has felt like a good idea causes me a great deal of anxiety. I start to breathe deeply, hoping to store oxygen in all parts of my lungs for the descent. However, my preparations seem to be of no avail. I dive and know I am doing something dangerous. The leering dolphins swim around and frighten me. I hear watery whispers telling me that

Anna has dived down to the ocean floor with plenty of breath to spare. How does she do it? How does she do it, I wonder, as panic settles over me? I awake, having just surfaced, panting, and gasping for breath.

I hear a knock on the door. It sounds welcome and earth bound, very much a part of this world. It is the old nun who gives me a flashlight, says the vigil will begin in ten minutes, and disappears. I sit on the edge of the bed, trying to get my bearings, trying to feel that I am in a peaceful monastery, not somewhere in the twilight zone.

I dress quickly in the chilled room. The window is open to the cool spring night that smells of the tilled earth, crocus blooms, and early forsythia buds. I slip into a pair of jeans, wrap myself in a wool shawl, take up the flashlight, and step outside. A large waxing moon appears from behind a cloud. It is a bit like walking alone to the Pines on a moonlit night. I think of whispers coming from the trees until the whispers become frighteningly real. I lower my head and concentrate on the arch of my flashlight. Then, as I reach the chapel door, I glance up toward the moon, now silver and uncovered. Tree branches overhead cross my view and intertwine. I hold to the door as to an anchor and squeeze my eyes shut. The night is soft, but my imagination is powerful.

I step inside the chapel and sit in the dimly-lighted room. Windows are open and candles flicker. Shadows echo and dance to Gregorian refrains as invisible scented clouds of incense drift through the sanctuary. At mysterious intervals, chime-like bells are rung to signal a passage in the chanted prayers. Though I was baptised as a Catholic, I rarely attended Mass and understand very little of what is happening in the Latin vigil. I have certainly never been in a chapel at this hour of the night. There is a mystical pagan quality to the songs, a yearning in the women's voices that hypnotizes me. On one level, I resist what I feel in this room, yet at the same time I am fascinated and want to understand it. Detachment, a sense of floating, takes hold of me and time dissolves.

Before I realize it, the vigil is over, and I am out in the night, retracing my steps to the guest house, trying to assimilate my feelings, wishing for a second that I had worn something long and loose that would touch my ankles and slow to the rhythm of my hips. I think, suddenly, of a desire I once had to sew my own clothes, to design them, and wear them exactly as I wished, to wear black, heavy fabrics that drape with dignity. I had thought to line the outfits in brilliant crimson, emerald, ivory, orange, to sew high collars, and long tunics. The outfits would be worn wherever I wished, without inhibiting or dictating my action. I would enjoy sewing them and wearing them each day to suit myself. In a way, it was what the nuns did. They defied fashions, defied anyone to guess what was behind their habits. The thought still intrigues me. I imagine wearing a black robe lined in crimson silk.

Intellectually, I am not free, I realize. I am locked in, dressed in pretense, yet I feel angry and irritated by my trap and want it all stripped away. Slowly, my sanity returns, and with it, my practical nature, acquired so laboriously over the years. Perhaps handmade dresses designed in symbols are not for me. I have been living in the real world too long.

With these thoughts, I arrive back in my room, slam the window down tightly, and drop my clothes to the floor. I crawl tiredly into bed, draw up the covers, and slide down in the comforting darkness.

I am awakened by the chapel bell first thing the next morning. It is very early, but I have always had to get up early for work. I do not need to get up this morning I remind myself. Going to chapel every four or six hours would fill my holiness quota for the year in very short time. The constant self-awareness would drive me to self-indulgent madness. I have other things to think about besides myself.

Half an hour later, my mind has stopped turning, and I have, for the first time in my life, run out of things to be concerned about. I cannot put off my summons from Mother Superior forever. I sit there a moment and look at my cheerless room. It has taken me about three minutes to dress and tidy the place. I sit there impatiently, hearing a clock ticking in my head. I might as well go to Mass since there is not much else to do.

Sun shines into the chapel that morning. The night clouds are dissipated or blown away, and the inner courtyard that I cannot see is filled with the chattering and song of birds. I cannot think. For the first time in my life, I cannot think. The sounds that fill the air, the sun slanting through the open windows beside the altar, the smell of cedar like the tips of roots beneath the earth, and the tulips and daffodils that have been placed in growing pots on the floor, refreshing and full of daylight, are overwhelming to my senses. I feel that Anna is watching me.

Again, I am the only person sitting in chapel. I move around slowly as I sit in one seat, then another and try to find a place that can give me a view of the singers. But the latticework screen is ingenious, somewhat like the leaves of a tree. There is an illusion of openness, yet there is total privacy. I can see no faces, cannot tell which nun is singing the solo, cannot study the expressions on any of the faces. I can tell that several of the nuns are dressed differently from the others and guess that they are the postulants, candidates for the future of the monastic order. That startles me. I cannot imagine that anyone chooses to live in convents any more, and surely, not the cloistered kind with prison bars. I am stunned that women, younger than myself, still consider this life. Yet all that comes through are the honest voices singing Latin words that I do not understand.

When the ceremony is finished, I am approached by the old nun again. She tells me where the dining room is, says that meals are served directly after each of the daytime services, then leaves after telling me her name is Mother Jerome. Wise Saint Jerome, I think, the Biblical scholar. She looks more like an ancient gnome.

The dining room is small. It contains a crude wooden table and two benches. There is one curtainless window and a small window slot in the far wall for the handling of food. Someone slides open a slot in the wall, says good morning, then passes a plate of breakfast food to the ledge. Whoever it is, steps back quietly and is gone. I take my plate to the table and eat in silence: whole wheat bread, a pat of butter, some homemade jam, and a cup of hot chocolate. The act of eating alone, though I have done it often, is different here. I continually look over my shoulder, expecting someone to come into the room, but no one does. I savor each bite as though I am present at a feast. When the slot slides open again, I know I am expected to return my dishes to the ledge. I murmur a polite thank you, but get no response from the figure beyond the wall before the slot is abruptly shut. Idle talk is definitely not encouraged.

I know that what I should do next is announce that I am willing to have that interview with Mother Superior. After all, that is my reason for coming here. But whether it is cowardice or merely a streak of defiance, I'm not prepared to see her yet, and I procrastinate. Suddenly, I want to put some distance between myself and those stark stern buildings. I make an appointment to see Mother Superior the next day, retrieve my purse, and go out to my car.

It takes nearly a full tank of gas, driving along the coast, for that is the direction I head first, before I can slow the car and stop. I drive through Old Lime, and Black Point, Rocky Neck, and Niantic. I am pointed back to Boston. But when I get to New Haven and drive through the Yale complex, I am compelled to park the car, get out, and walk through the green. In my mind I hear the piano of Dave Brubeck as it brings back memories of my first few years away from home. Connecticut College for Women was not far. New Haven and Yale Medical School was not far, either, but far enough to keep me from home. I can still hear one of my dates as he sat beside me, laughing at something, but I cannot remember his face or name. I do remember that we went to a concert at the Yale Bowl, and I held a giant yellow chrysanthemum. I wore my first pair of Weejun loafers and a green plaid skirt, a pink barret, and an Irish-knit sweater, trying to imitate Karen Howells or Cynthia Easton, no doubt. It was an Indian summer evening in the early sixties, and I knew my date would try to take me back to his room and the dorm. But he would never help me forget Nathan.

Brubeck music and formless jazz, free, and easy, and without passion, that is what I have settled for these last thirty years--except in my work. My work has been a receptacle for my vast energies and resentments. I have so much energy that sometimes I wonder I don't push people around, or shout, or walk the streets at night. But medicine is demanding and it is easy to divert unlimited energy through that channel. No one finds it peculiar that at work I am passionate, complex, and driven, while at home I am a different person. But then, few people have ever gotten close enough to see me at home.

Recently, I made the mistake of phoning Nathan.

He answered the phone and responded as though we had just parted at the nearest street corner. When I asked him what he was doing he shouted, "Working! What the hell else would I be doing?" I heard angry frustration and a man driven. There he is in New York City working, and I am in Boston working, yet we can never seem to work together. Simply talking to me made him tense and angry, so I found an excuse to end the conversation quickly. We continue to hide our true selves from each other and the rest of the world. But there is a voice inside me that knows something is missing. It will not be quiet, no matter what I do or pretend.

I sit there thinking for a few more minutes until I notice a fabric shop across the street. The colors in the display window draw me closer. I know that I have no talents in music, or painting, poetry, or sculpting but I want to buy some material, a few special colors to touch. I want to sew intricate hand stitches and watch my fingers caress the vibrant textures. Having only myself to please, I walk in and buy crimson and ivory silk, black crepe, and lapis shantung flecked with gold, also, a pattern, needles, thread, pins, and the scissors I will need. Once back in the car, I hug the package before placing it on the seat. I can hardly wait to get back to my room to open the package and touch the vibrant strands of thread. I have not sewn for years, but I remember the serenity of sewing tiny stitches by hand. It was Anna who taught me to embroider and sew my own clothes. Since she left, I have not had the patience or the inclination to sew. Suddenly, I know I am going to make a black tunic suit lined in lapis blue, edged in gold. I intend to handstitch the entire outfit and wear it when it is finished.

I drive back to the abbey, taking the Old Post Road through Cheshire. The weather is unusually beautiful and I leave the windows open. Pastures along the road are filled with frisky horses and colts, and not another car has come up behind me for several miles. I slow the car to watch a foal wobbling alongside its mother.

Back at the abbey there is a note on my bed saying that Mother Superior would be happy to meet with me the next day after breakfast. That gives me another evening on my own. I attend another vigil, eat dinner alone, and take a walk. I try to imagine why I have been asked to come here. I have tried for years to imagine Anna wearing a nun's habit or Anna walking about looking pious all the time. Her beautiful voice must have been a special addition to the plain song. I wasn't surprised when I stopped in the souvenir shop at the end of my walk and found several albums of Gregorian chant that had been recorded in the chapel. There was an Easter vigil and an Advent collection. There were the six ordinary services in a liturgical day and there was a special recording of the Passion of Christ. The names of the individual singers are omitted, of course. Nuns often remain anonymous. I leave money for my purchases and take the albums back to my room, knowing, that when I have the opportunity to listen to them, I will be able to identify Anna's voice. I do not wonder what I am going to do with my time that evening. I can't wait to begin sewing, so I go to my room, shut the door, and work silently until midnight.

It seems that my head has just touched the pillow when I am awakened for matins. There are no dreams that night, just an awakening that is dreamlike. It is a warm night. I step into a long peasant skirt and slip a shawl over my shoulders. The moon is nearly full, so I leave the flashlight behind. There are no clouds that slip across the moon's surface as I walk slowly to the chapel, but it seems noisier than I remember. There is an occasional night bird, an owl, and down alongside St. Gregory's, a mother raccoon and two babies trying to lift the lid on a garbage pail. The mother looks serious, intent on mastering her task, while the young ones decide to sniff around the side of the building and wait for her efforts to succeed.

I feel happy when I realize that I have not spoken much to anyone all day, and yet, my reflections do not feel burdensome as they often do when I am alone. The night has an unforgettable quality about it. The moon reminds me of the ivory silk I bought, and I imagine another outfit, black with ivory beneath like night with the moon inside. Surprising, how little of the sky's space the moon takes, while the sun fills every cell with its presence.

From the moment I stand in the chapel, I feel Anna's presence. I also feel the most incredible urge to see where she is buried. Having not seen her in so many years, yet keeping her alive in my heart, it is difficult to accept that she no longer exists. In a way, I need proof. Yet what can I do? The funeral was private; everything in this place is secretive. It troubles me that thirty years of Anna's life is hidden from me. Who will I have as my model if she is gone, if a yearly letter does not come in the mail, if there is no one to whom I can write? I can think of no one else I wish to emulate and feel more lost and lonely than I have in many years--the way I felt before Anna came into my life.

The sweet voices of the nuns come through my barrier of pitiful reveries. It is lovely, I think, but how can they do this night after night, year after year? I would die of the boredom and the endless superimposed routine. None of this fits my image of Anna. How did she fix her wild curly hair, and how did she exist in sombre black when she was once surrounded by vivid colors and dressed in bright hand-knit clothes? There is nothing here, no ornamentation, no color, except for the spring flowers on the altar. She used to love to talk, to listen to the radio, and attend concerts. It was Anna who took me to my first art museum.

We took a bus to Hartford, I remember, to the Wadsworth Atheneum and there we saw the world through the crazy fantastic interpretations of Rene Magritte. How could Anna exile herself to such a sterile colorless life? For the first time in thirty years, I feel a sadness instead of anger at her disappearance from my life. Sadness, because I cannot understand what was once in her heart or the reasons she found to shut herself away from me and the rest of the world. For the first time since I heard of Anna's death last week, I cry. I cry because I miss her, and because, after all these years, I have to let her go.

I need to see more of this place where she spent her time and slip quietly out of the chapel. But instead of going back to the guest house, I wander to the heavy gates that bar the inner courtyard and stand there, feeling shut out by the massive oak doors. They are locked. Like a sleepwalker, I wander beside the connecting stone wall and follow it towards the fields. I look over the wall into a vast garden, then climb the wall. Inside the compound, I walk through the newly-tilled garden. By moonlight, I continue towards the nun's dormitories. I do not know what I hope to find, some clue, perhaps, to what Anna's life was like. I find the door to the dormitory and walk by dimly-lit wall lanterns toward the sparse cells. I find them easily. I can still hear chanting in the distance, for the dormitory is quite close to the back door of the chapel, where a window near the altar is open. I walk down the hallway, peering into one room after another. The rooms are identical: a cot, a dresser, a small window with a crucifix above it, a desk, a Bible. There are no mirrors, no frills, no curtains, no carpets. I have often been curious, but it is with dismay that I see the living conditions to be as stark as I had imagined them to be.

Suddenly, the singing stops. I look around frantically for an exit until I see another doorway at the end of the hall. I step toward it, my heart beating rapidly. The last room on the right, I wonder, was it Anna's room? The cot has been stripped of its bedding. The room is more barren than any of the others. Is that the room she slept in for thirty years? Would they sew her habit to fit someone else or pass on her book of meditations and rosary beads to a young postulant? Did she consider the women here to be her friends? Would they miss her?

Once out of the dormitory, I circle the far end of the garden looking for the cemetery. It appears to be located beyond the forge, where I cannot resist looking in at the twisted metal sculptings of Mary and Joseph. Unfinished crosses and a crucifix stand in a corner. Copper molding edges for stained glass windows and sections of cut and colored glass lean against the walls. I wish I could see the colors. Christ, distorted into a modern figure, tall, misshapen, and grotesque, his face elongated in perpetual sorrow, lies on the work table.

Outside the forge, I pause by a barn for the farm animals. The door is open. Dairy cows, goats, and a few sheep bleat nervously as I move on, anxious to see the graveyard that is located in a fenced off area at the farthest end of the property. I can see Anna's grave easily by the light of the moon. It is the newest mound of fresh earth, topped with a metal cross. I stand inside the gate, then walk closer to peer down at the engraved inscription on it. "Mother Julianna", it reads, "1908 - 1985". I kneel there in the rich, moist earth that has already accepted the spring flowers planted on her grave. Being in this spot, I feel peaceful, as though Anna is still here to hold me. I remember her last embrace. It has left a lasting impression on me, a mark that I have never forgotten. It was the last time I saw her, just before I left for college. We walked up to the Pines for a picnic, and afterwards, we danced because I was really going away and Anna was pleased for me. She held me close when we had finished dancing, and she told me to be happy and to keep in touch.

My sense of touch has always been my least developed sense, but I guess Anna knew that. Out of touch, untouchable, touchy--these are words that Nathan uses for me. It is my blind spot, he tells me, my area of greatest unawareness. He, of course, always needs to touch. Like Paolo, he works with his art until his paintbrush is an extension of his body. I, on the other hand, rarely reach out, am insensitive to touching unless it is with my mind. Too intellectual, all mind, no heart, is what Nathan says. I can touch my daughter, though, Anna. I dread the day when she will move out because I know we will rarely touch again. I hate this abbey, this grave, that keeps us out of touch. I want to sink my hands into the loose earth and dig down to your body.

But a feeling of helplessness overcomes me like an embrace. I hesitate, and in that instant, my desperate need seems to drain from me and bursts out in a flood of tears. Then, as the tears flow, I get up from my knees and discard my clothes. It is a free feeling. I begin to dance around the mound of earth, my arms swaying back and forth over my head. I am reminded of some of the dancing statues I have seen in my travels to India. I can hear tinkling bells on my ankles as I stamp and jump, feeling like a young girl. My skin tingles in the night air as it absorbs night light from the low hanging moon. It must have been very late by then because I notice that the moon has moved across the sky. I dance and dance across a finely-balanced musical bridge. I have never before understood why people love to dance and sway to music. But tonight the music in the air seems to come right out of Anna's grave. It finds my toes, moves my feet, and encircles my body in a vibrant cocoon. As it gets wilder and more powerful, I dance faster, and more frantically, and gasp for breath. The music rings in my ears and thunders in my chest until I think my heart will burst. I remember stories of ghosts who dance men to death beside the graves of women who have died of unrequited love. "I loved you, Anna, but you went away!" I am about to faint with exhaustion. I spin wildly as my hair tumbles down my back and my legs become weak.

At last, I sink down. I am bewildered with my own performance, yet overjoyed. For once in my life, I am not held back by my own body. I want to roll in the soft earth, and that is what I do. I want to scoop up handfuls of it, and let it run like water between my fingers, and I do that, too. I want to pick one of the flowers that stands guard at Anna's grave, so I do.

Sated with joy, I put on my clothes and walk back to the guest house. I feel stronger as I walk. My feet seem to hug the ground with a new-found balance. And when I lie down in bed without a shower, I can feel the dusty silken earth sliding between my skin and the sheets, my body's awareness sensual and gratifying. I am thankful for strong arms and legs. I feel like a pagan nymph, a meadow spirit. I want to phone Nathan and say, "It isn't true that I cannot feel anything! I can feel the entire universe through my skin. My heart has grown. My lungs have expanded. And my feet, my feet are so happy to be alive, you can't imagine." But I know I will not do such a thing. I do not know if this change in me is permanent. I am inexplicably happy. I want to sing. Instead, I fall asleep. It is a dreamless drugged sleep danced in a poppy field.

I awake the next morning, my feet still ready to dance, and remember that I have an appointment to meet Mother Superior. I have no idea what to expect from this visit. But at least this morning I know I will go to the appointment with less reluctance and fewer fears. My dance last night has left me stronger. I put my feet firmly on the floor at the side of my bed.

A short time later, Mother Jerome knocks on my door to say that Mother Superior is ready to see me. I follow her across the front yard and into the chapel. She opens a door that leads to a short hallway and a waiting room with several plain but comfortable chairs. A sparse bookshelf with a few books on the lives of saints stands against one wall. I am to wait and Mother Superior will see me at the reception window. I recognize it as the elaborate, cloister barricade where Anna was interviewed thirty years ago. The room still resembles a large confessional.

Minutes later, as I sit there staring at the titles in the bookcase, I hear the scraping of chair legs on the floor behind the wall. Then slowly, the window is opened. There is no velvet curtain as I have expected behind the sliding door. I peer into a shadowy room, directly into the gentle eyes of Mother Superior. She looks at me in a kindly manner. I am silent, wondering if perhaps I should be the first to speak.

"My name is Julia, Mother."

"I know who you are, my dear."

"You wanted to see me, Mother?"

"I have something to give you, Julia. It is rather unusual. Perhaps, you would care to open the door to your left and come behind here for our visit."

I stand up feeling like a child peeking into a confessional. As I step into the cubicle, Mother

Superior reaches over and pulls the chain on a wall lamp. It lights the room with a soft evening glow. My sense of time and place become disoriented. Outside, I remember the morning to be bright with irrepressible sunshine.

"I want to see the Julia that Mother Julianna spoke of as her beloved daughter," she said quietly.

I look at her face and remember that Anna had spoken of this woman with great reverence. "She mentioned you, as well, Mother. She thought a great deal of you."

When she smiles, her strong white teeth belie her age. Her eyes are deep lined, her cheekbones high and stretched tightly. She must have been beautiful once. I imagine her putting herself in these confines for so many years and lower my eyes to hide my disapproval.

"It was not an unhappy life that Mother Julianna had with us, Julia. She was happy here. She brought us a great deal of joy. She had something to teach each one of us, and we grieve at her parting. We pray for her and remember her fondly."

I stare at her and try not to succumb to tears.

"You must not continue to resent the fact that she came to us and left you behind, Julia. You're a mature woman, now. It is time you understood."

I look at her, startled that she has read my thoughts so accurately.

"That is the reason I have consented to give you this journal that she dedicated to you. It is most unusual that we let anything of this sort leave the abbey. You understand that we consider all personal possessions as church property. Even our bodies are buried in this holy place. It is a question of complete renunciation."

I nod, unable to speak.

"I have read through this journal, and if Mother Julianna was as perceptive as I knew her to be, I think you are in need of this journal, Julia. She wrote it for you."

With that, she hands me a package. I grip it with greedy hands and feel a desire to run out of the room, back to privacy. I want to read it, devour every word, and bring Anna back to life.

"I am sure she never expected to be given permission to give you this journal. So I hope you will appreciate its private nature."

I nodded, again. "Yes, Mother."

"Do you have anything you would like to say to me, Julia? Anything you would like to ask?"

I want to shout and ask why my Anna chose such a life rather than one where we could have met each day to talk and share life's worries and successes. I want to ask this stranger what it is that I lack in my understanding. I want to know why I am lonely, living out there in a world surrounded by people and material success, a world where everyone I love leaves me. What have I done to deserve such loneliness and rejection?

Instead, I keep my voice steady. "Was Mother Julianna lonely do you think? Did she miss me?"

"I don't want to sound unkind, my dear, but Mother Julianna did not miss you. She was rarely lonely. If I can make you understand, I will say honestly, that she delighted in being alone. It was precious time to her. She once said she never had enough time alone. That is quite a statement to make in an abbey. Even those of us who have prayed, contemplated, and meditated for years still get lonely. It isn't an easy life. But she was a unique person. She was a saint, I would venture to say. She had surrendered to the fact that she was alone in the world and whatever problems she had to settle were between herself and God. She no longer wanted to hide from that fact. The time she set aside each day to write to you was an act of kindness and love, Julia. She did not need you or miss you, my dear, and that is not a reflection on you."

"Are you sure she was in her right mind, Mother?"

She laughs then, humored at the mere idea. "She was the most sane, most humble, person I have ever had the privilege to know. She was grateful for every breath she took, for every moment of prayer, for every song of thanksgiving. She spent her life in thanksgiving."

I cannot think of anything else to say. I want to be alone to read the journal.

Mother Superior nods her head, gives me a blessing, and asks that the journal stay in my private care. It is her only stipulation for letting it leave the abbey. I agree, of course, and hurry back to my room.

Anna's Journal --

My dear Julia, I often suspected you were watching me. Once, during prayer, I had thought to refine myself into a body of light. That was an illusion, of course, but in so doing, I would have become invisible. At the time, I wanted to escape from your eyes. I did not want to accept responsibility for them.

There was always the watching and being watched. After Paolo died, I came to fear your empty staring eyes. They demanded so much of me, far more than I thought I had to give. You see, I was lonely, so very lonely, Julia. It may have been that reason, more than any other, that took me to the monastery. However, after all these years, I realize that the reasons I thought I came to be here and the reasons I stayed were different. I stay because I love it here.

Forgive me, Julia, but I no longer wish to disguise my suspicions. I have lived in harmony with the eyes for years, now. I hope you shall accept this journal for what it is. It is evidence of my existence and proof of my growth, and each time I look at my experiences, my awareness grows. What I am trying to explain to you is that there are levels of awareness, Julia, just as there are experiences that are more or less visible. What I once blamed you for no longer has the same meaning to me.

In writing and sharing this journal, I am defining the history and perimeters of my growth. The writing helps to balance my mind and my emotions. It seems to me that those of us who see only with the eyes are subjected to illusions; those who hear only with the *ears are subjected to the same illusions. These years in the monastery have been framed by the sound of chapel bells. Their sharp sounds have been salient upward-pointing signals. They have pierced my heart as sharp arrows, and I have listened to sounds that have eventually set me free and eased my loneliness.*

I remember the distance I had to walk one rainy night to find my way to the monastery. That walk once took on epic proportions in my mind. That same walk later became a revelation to me. The sound of falling rain became a miracle. In the rain I heard surrender. I stopped struggling against freedom and loneliness. They had become ideas around which I had constructed elaborate frames. When they wrap my coffin in a black curtain and bury it in the earth, I will also surrender--to death--and I will dance with balance and joy.

Forgive me, Julia, not for my suspicions, but for my mistaken attitude. These days, I can see your beautiful eyes and appreciate their intense beauty. To me, your face has become a living icon.

Julia --

The pages of Anna's diary are dated nearly thirty years before. They are yellow and smell of mold. My heart contracts from the sudden exposure to Anna's naked thoughts. To say that I do not like what I read would be too simple. I feel exposed before such scrupulous honesty.

I stare out the open window. A gentle breeze shakes the curtains. It carries the smell of flowers, and newly-tilled soil, and the freshly-dug grave. The barns, bright red against the spring grass, compose a perfect New England post card. Nothing about the view is out of place except my eyes. They will not blink.

"Anna, my eyes have watched and tried to copy you for so many years. You have every right to suspect me. If I had known myself better, perhaps I might have become a photographer. Instead, I chose medicine and became absorbed in the masks that are inevitable in sickness and pain. Even in my letters to you, I stalked you, questioned you, pried into your motives and attitudes. You said, 'Be grateful, Julia. Be grateful for what you have.' Yet, I did not understand or ignored what was mine until it has been nearly lost. I could not see myself as I was, so I pretended to be you. Once, your example was a healing balm to my eyes. Now, your journal gives courage to my lonely heart. Thank you, Anna, for your friendship. You had every right to suspect me. Fortunately, today I am strong enough to hear you. I can only hope that, as you say, hearing is a direct channel to the heart. Perhaps, if I stop watching Nathan and trying to imitate him, too, I may be able to hear him with my heart someday.

Perhaps, if I keep my own journal and read it aloud each day, I will begin to hear myself. For I could not bear to hear you accuse me, Anna. In my own heart, I hear only love--the sound of it reaches out to me after all these years."